

Partner or Ally? V4 Countries' Bilateral Relations with the United States

Comparative Analysis of Strategic Documents between 2020 and 2023

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After its summit in Prague on 27 February 2024, the Visegrád Group suffered a breakdown of relations, mainly due to the divergent views of its member states regarding Russia's war in Ukraine. The V4 countries split into a pro-Ukraine block (Poland and the Czech Republic) and a Ukraine-sceptic block (Hungary and Slovakia), which made it difficult for the group to present a united front on key issues and diminished its ability to influence broader European policy. In addition, the lack of unity weakens the V4's collective security posture while the Central European region has gained strategic importance as part of NATO's eastern flank. The deterioration of the security environment also impacted the V4 countries' bilateral relations with the United States, as the pro-Ukraine countries intend to maintain close cooperation with Washington, while the sceptics are staunch critics of Western policies supporting Ukraine. This paper highlights the fundamental differences between the latest security strategies and foreign policies of the Visegrád Group countries towards the United States, Russia and China, looking at these countries' latest national security strategies and the 2022 integrated country strategies of the United States Department of State. Our comparative analysis shows that Hungary can be considered an outsider among the V4 countries since the Hungarian Government intends to pursue pragmatic cooperation with Russia and China while U.S.–Hungarian relations are gradually deteriorating. In contrast, the other three member states – especially Poland and the Czech Republic, but also Slovakia regardless of Robert Fico's return to power in 2023 – favoured closer ties with the United States and shared most of the same concerns over Moscow and Beijing.

Keywords: Visegrád Group, United States, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia

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Introduction

Four Central European nations – Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – form the Visegrád Group, sometimes referred to as the Visegrád Four or the V4, which seeks to further the integration with the European Union (EU) while advancing cooperation in military, economic, cultural and energy-related areas. Furthermore, all four states are members of the Bucharest Nine (B9) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The role and relevance of this subregional cooperation are changing dynamically and are often the subject of debate among experts.² Instead of attempting to add to that discourse, this paper aims to highlight the differences among the member states concerning their relationships with the United States and their security strategies driving their foreign policy decisions regarding Russia and China.

The Visegrád Four became politically divided³ as a result of different responses to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, despite some suggesting earlier that "the Visegrád Group's greatest strength lies in its flexibility to become more responsive to the challenges it faces and it is likely therefore to remain appealing to its member states and to be a permanent feature within the wider cohort of European Union subregional partnerships".⁴ We have witnessed a significant rupture among the V4 countries when Russia's war in Ukraine drove a wedge between the Hungarian Government and the rest of the group: Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and especially Poland.⁵ While many consider the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán to be Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest ally in the EU,⁶ the Polish Government is traditionally one of Europe's most hawkish on Russia, and the vast majority of Polish people see the Russian Federation as a major threat.⁷ Similarly, while Hungary's relations with the United States hit an all-time low recently,⁸ Warsaw can be considered one of the most important allies of Washington in the region, and their relations keep getting stronger.⁹

This rupture of relations within the Visegrád Group is apparent even when listening to statements from the respective governments regarding the war in Ukraine.¹⁰ Its reality becomes even more evident when taking a closer look at the national security strategies of the V4 countries. In the following pages, after providing some historical context, we conduct a comparative analysis of the latest national security strategies of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, published between 2020 and 2023. We focus on how these strategic documents reference the United States, Russia and China and whether they view these great powers as close allies, reliable partners, or security threats. We also examine how these documents describe these defining bilateral relations. To facilitate this comparison, we present our findings in a table.

² BASORA 2011; ROŠTEKOVÁ–ROULET 2014; DANIŠKA 2018; GROSZKOWSKI 2018.

³ BECK 2024.

⁴ TÖRÖ et al. 2014.

⁵ GOSLING 2022.

⁶ Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty 2019; JANJEVIC 2018.

⁷ POUSHTER et al. 2022.

⁸ McCausland 2023; MORRIS 2023; HIGGINS 2024.

⁹ U.S. Department of State 2024a.

¹⁰ FIALA 2022; BAYER 2023; HIGGINS 2023; Al Jazeera 2024; POLLET 2024; JANICEK 2024; Reuters 2024.

Additionally, we draw on the relevant 2022 Integrated Country Strategies (ICS) for each state – published regularly by the United States Department of State to articulate U.S. priorities¹¹ – to look for similar descriptions of the bilateral relations between the United States and the V4 countries. These descriptions and this comparative analysis allow us to assess the “tightness” of these bilateral relations. Although we are talking about NATO countries that are officially allies, “increasing tightness” makes it more apparent to leaders which states would more likely stand with them in a conflict and which would potentially distance themselves or stand against them.¹² The paper also includes a summary of the overlaps in the content of the examined strategic documents and highlights the striking differences, particularly in Hungary’s approach towards the United States, Russia and China, in contrast to the strategies of the other three member states.

Historical context

Before 2010, Hungary’s relations with Russia were characterised by a cautious and often unfriendly stance. After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Hungary sought to distance itself from Russian influence, focusing on closer ties with the West, joining institutions like NATO and becoming a member of the European Union. The legacy of Soviet oppression and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution continued to cast a shadow over Russian–Hungarian bilateral relations. Political relations were strained despite the existing economic ties, reflecting Hungary’s desire to assert its independence and align more closely with the West. In contrast, Sino–Hungarian relations have always been generally positive, although, after 2010, Hungary and China have also significantly strengthened their bilateral relations, primarily through economic cooperation and investment, with Hungary becoming a key partner in China’s Belt and Road Initiative. This period has also seen increased diplomatic exchanges and cultural ties, solidifying a close partnership between the two nations.¹³

Traditionally, Poland’s relations with Russia have been marked by tension and conflict, particularly due to historical grievances, not just because of recent geopolitical events like the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In contrast, Poland’s relationship with China has been more pragmatic, focusing on economic cooperation and trade, especially under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, Warsaw remains cautious of China’s growing influence in Europe and traditionally aligns closely with the United States and the European Union on strategic issues.¹⁴

¹¹ U.S. Department of State s. a.

¹² Organski and Kugler offer a method for measuring alliance behaviour or the tightness of an alliance. They developed it from a scale built initially based on four categories: defence pact, mutual nonaggression pact, entente and no alliance. Using the tightness and looseness of alliances, they developed a simple eight-point scale that reflects both the degree of commitment and the direction of change in commitment. A positive change means the given state increased its alliance commitments with other nations, while a negative change means the given country decreased its commitments. Moreover, a position on the negative end of the scale means cutting ties (ORGANSKI–KUGLER 1980: 38–42).

¹³ GREILINGER 2023; SZANDELSZKY 2024.

¹⁴ PASZAK 2021; BACHULSKA 2021; PARDO 2024.

Relations between the Czech Republic and Russia have been marked by significant tensions, particularly due to events like the Russian annexation of Crimea and the Vrbětice ammunition depot explosion in 2014.¹⁵ These incidents, along with the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in 2018¹⁶ and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have led to a substantial deterioration in diplomatic ties. The economic relationship between the Czech Republic and China has been more complex and has evolved over time. Initially, during President Miloš Zeman's tenure, there was a push to strengthen ties with expectations for Chinese investments and increased trade. However, these expectations were not fully met, leading to a reassessment of the relationship. Major Czech companies such as Škoda Auto and PPF (Home Credit) have either reduced their presence or completely withdrawn from the Chinese market.¹⁷ The current Czech administration under President Petr Pavel has indicated a shift towards a more cautious approach, focusing on European and transatlantic relations.¹⁸

Slovakia has historically maintained strong economic ties with Russia, particularly in the energy sector, as Moscow has been a major supplier of natural gas, oil and nuclear fuel to Slovakia. Despite EU sanctions following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, Slovakia has continued to engage with Russia, although it has also taken steps to reduce its energy dependence on Russian supplies.¹⁹ The relationship has been marked by a mix of cooperation and tension, especially in the context of broader EU–Russia relations. Regarding Sino–Slovakian relations, over the past decades, Slovakia and China have developed a relationship primarily centred on economic cooperation, with Slovakia becoming a significant exporter of automobiles to China.²⁰ However, this relationship has faced challenges, including trade imbalances and political tensions related to broader EU–China relations.²¹ In contrast, Slovakia and the United States have strong diplomatic ties, cooperating closely in military and law enforcement areas since establishing relations in 1993. In 2022, right before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Slovakia's parliament and president approved a Defense Cooperation Agreement²² with the United States that allows the U.S. military to use two Slovak air force bases for ten years.²³ The treaty was supported by the government of then Prime Minister Eduard Heger, while it was fiercely opposed by the opposition, including Robert Fico's Smer party, which led the government in 2018 when talks with the U.S. began. Critics claimed the defence agreement compromised the country's sovereignty, making possible a permanent presence of U.S. troops on Slovak territory and even enabling a possible deployment of nuclear weapons in Slovakia.²⁴

¹⁵ JANICEK 2021.

¹⁶ CASTLE 2018; CORERA 2021.

¹⁷ ZEMÁNEK 2023.

¹⁸ KOWALSKI 2023.

¹⁹ Euractiv 2014; Ceenergy News 2023.

²⁰ OEC 2022a.

²¹ SEBENA 2024.

²² Agreement on Defense Cooperation Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Slovak Republic 2022.

²³ ZACHAR 2022.

²⁴ HRABOVSKA FRANCELOVA 2022.

Diverging security interests?

Hungary

Hungary's 2020 National Security Strategy references the United States in the 112th paragraph under the section describing the country's fundamental interests. The document emphasises the importance of the alliance between Europe and the United States based on shared values, interests and civilisational ties. The document recognises that maintaining a strategic relationship with the United States, including high-level defence and economic cooperation, is fundamental to Hungary's interests. Additionally, the strategy acknowledges the United States as a crucial player in international security policy in the future.²⁵

Russia is referenced as an important player in global and regional security matters in paragraph 118. Hungary's National Security Strategy recognises recent "major tensions" between NATO and Russia and between the EU and Russia.²⁶ However, it does not consider the Russian Federation a threat to international security.²⁷ Instead, it highlights that NATO maintains open channels of political dialogue, although the Alliance has strengthened its deterrence and defence capabilities and suspended cooperation with Moscow. The Hungarian Government firmly believes that political dialogue with the Kremlin and measures that reduce risk and build trust are necessary, especially considering the deteriorating strategic environment. Hungary prioritises maintaining the cohesion of NATO and the EU while supporting the pragmatic development of Hungarian–Russian relations and economic cooperation.²⁸

In the following paragraph, Hungary's National Security Strategy mentions China as the world's second-largest economy, noting that Beijing is becoming more assertive politically and militarily, suggesting that its military and security policies need long-term monitoring. As the document states, Hungary seeks to strengthen its relations with China, which the Hungarian Government considers pragmatic. The document highlights the importance of the "Modern Silk Road" program (the Belt and Road Initiative), which aims to enhance trade relations and connect Europe, Africa and Asia, which the Hungarian Government considers mutually advantageous. However, Hungary's National Security Strategy also mentions the potential vulnerabilities arising from China's investments in critical infrastructure, its role as a supplier of advanced infocommunications technology, and its growing regional influence.²⁹

²⁵ Government Resolution 1163/2020 (IV. 21.) on Hungary's National Security Strategy, paragraph 112.

²⁶ The Government Resolution 1163/2020 on Hungary's National Security Strategy was adopted on 21 April 2020, and published on 21 June 2021, less than a year before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, but six years after the Russian Federation annexed Crimea in March 2014.

²⁷ While Hungary's National Security Strategy does not consider Russia a threat, NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept identifies Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" that "seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation" (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept 2022: 4).

²⁸ Hungary's National Security Strategy 2020, paragraph 118.

²⁹ Hungary's National Security Strategy 2020, paragraph 119.

Poland

According to the 2020 National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland, the most important factor shaping Poland's security is its embedding in the transatlantic and European structures and developing bilateral and regional cooperation with key allies. In addition, the strategic document mentions that the transatlantic relationship has been tested in recent years and that the strategic bonds between the United States and its European allies are evolving. Poland strives to strengthen its security through its NATO and EU membership, "strategic partnership" with the U.S., and regional cooperation. Poland's security has been bolstered by assistance from the U.S. in security and defence, energy, trade, investment, and research and development. In addition, the enduring presence of the U.S. Armed Forces in Poland is an integral part of the bilateral partnership.³⁰

Poland's security strategy states that "the most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, pursued also by means of military force". The strategic document also highlights that Russia is intensively developing its offensive capabilities while it carries out hybrid nature activities, and its actions aim to destabilise the Western states and societies and to create divisions among Allies. The Polish strategic document adds that it should be assumed that Russia will continue undermining the international order to rebuild its power and spheres of influence. It is worth highlighting that the Polish strategy also mentions that within the European Union, divergent approaches concerning its further development are emerging and that there is also a noticeable risk of undermining the coherence of the positions of NATO and EU member states as a result of increasing internal tensions and actions undertaken by external entities, which can be considered a reference to Russia's growing influence in the region.³¹

In addition, Poland's National Security Strategy also mentions the growing strategic rivalry between the United States, China and Russia, and interestingly, this context of increasing geopolitical competition among the great powers is the only time China is mentioned in the document, noting that this rivalry affects the entire international system.³²

The Czech Republic

The 2023 National Security Strategy of the Czech Republic mentions developing bilateral relations with the United States only briefly among the "other important interests" that serve the country's "vital and strategic interests" and improve the society's resilience to security threats.³³

³⁰ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland 2020: 6; Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland 2024.

³¹ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland 2020: 6–7.

³² National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland 2020: 7.

³³ Security Strategy of the Czech Republic 2023: 6.

Concerning Russia, the document states in the key messages that Russia's war against Ukraine has put an end to the period of peace, stability and cooperation in Europe and that Moscow acts deliberately against the Czech Republic's political, economic and social stability. In addition, the document identifies Russia as a "fundamental threat" to the security of the Czech Republic. Under the section describing security threats and sources of instability, the Czech strategy states: "Russia is the biggest immediate and longstanding direct threat to the security of Europe and the international rules-based order." Like Poland's strategy, the Czech document includes that Russia seeks to retain and expand its sphere of influence in Europe, even by using force, and it seeks to destabilise its neighbourhood and other regions. The Czech security strategy also mentions that Russia uses hybrid operations targeting the Czech Republic's interests and security.³⁴

Regarding China, the Czech strategic document states that Beijing poses a "fundamental systemic challenge" globally and in terms of conducting direct influence operations in democratic countries, including the Czech Republic. It challenges the international order, which has adverse implications for Euro-Atlantic security. The Czech Republic's National Security Strategy highlights that China is increasing its military capabilities, including its nuclear forces. It also engages in cyber espionage and aims to control global data flows. Additionally, it uses various forms of economic coercion and hybrid interference tools. Chinese companies are closely associated with the state and are willing to work towards its goals. The Czech National Security Strategy also notes that Russia and China share the same interest in weakening the influence and unity of democratic countries.³⁵

Slovakia

The 2021 Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic also includes a section on the country's strategic security interests, where it first mentions the United States. According to the strategy, maintaining NATO's credible deterrence and collective defence – along with the transatlantic strategic partnership and the United States military presence in Europe – is crucial for Slovakia.³⁶ The United States is mentioned again later under the section detailing the security policy of Slovakia, according to which the U.S. is a "strategic transatlantic ally" of the Slovak Republic in NATO, with which Slovakia shares common values and is bound by a strong historical alliance and commitment to collective defence. Here, the strategy underscores again that it is in Slovakia's security interest to maintain the military presence of the United States in Europe, which contributes to the stability and security of the region and is the key deterrent and guarantee of effective defence against a possible armed attack on European NATO members.³⁷

³⁴ Security Strategy of the Czech Republic 2023: 15.

³⁵ Security Strategy of the Czech Republic 2023: 14–15.

³⁶ Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2021: 6.

³⁷ Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2021: 22.

Table 1: The main findings of the national security strategies of the V4 countries regarding the United States, Russia and China

	Hungary (2020)	Poland (2020)	The Czech Republic (2023)	Slovakia (2021)
USA	Maintaining the strategic relationship and the high-level defence and economic cooperation with the U.S. is in Hungary’s fundamental interest, as the U.S. will remain a decisive player in international security policy in the future.	Poland’s security is also shored up through the development of strategic cooperation with the USA in the fields of security and defence (including in the form of enduring the presence of the U.S. armed forces in Poland), technology, trade and energy.	Developing bilateral relations with the United States serves the country’s vital and strategic interests.	The USA is a strategic transatlantic ally of the Slovak Republic in NATO. Our security interest is to maintain the military presence of the USA in Europe.
Russia	One of the key actors in the international system, managing several global and regional security issues. Hungary has an interest in the pragmatic development of Hungarian–Russian relations and economic cooperation.	The most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, pursued also by means of military force.	Russia poses a fundamental threat to the security of the Czech Republic, and it is the biggest immediate and long-standing direct threat to the security of Europe and to the international rules-based order.	Slovakia is interested in developing good mutual relations with Russia. Moscow is an important actor and partner in addressing international threats and challenges. At the same time, with its confrontational approach in the military, security and political areas, represents a key security challenge.
China	Has the second-largest economy, a centre of civilisation, and it is playing an increasingly important role in the international system. Hungary is interested in the pragmatic strengthening of Sino–Hungarian relations. The Belt and Road Initiative is mutually advantageous.	Poland’s National Security Strategy mentions the growing strategic rivalry between the United States, China and Russia. This is the only time China is mentioned in the strategic document.	China poses a fundamental systemic challenge globally and in terms of direct influence operations. It calls into question the international order, which has adverse implications for Euro-Atlantic security. Russia and China share the same interest – weakening the influence and unity of democratic countries.	China is an important actor and partner in addressing global challenges, but also an economic and technological competitor and systemic rival of the EU.

Source: Hungary’s National Security Strategy 2020; National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland 2020; Security Strategy of the Czech Republic 2023; Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2021

Slovakia's security strategy mentions Russia twice. The first mention is made under the section that assesses the security environment of Slovakia and its neighbouring regions. This section highlights that the Russian Federation's aggressive behaviour led to the conflicts in Georgia and eastern Ukraine and the illegal occupation of Ukrainian Crimea and Sevastopol. These actions are considered a gross violation of international law. The second mention of Russia is made under the security policy section, where the document states that Slovakia aims to foster good relations with Russia since it is an important actor and partner in addressing international threats and challenges. However, the document notes that Moscow's confrontational approach in the military, security and political domains is a key challenge to Euro-Atlantic security. The document emphasises that Slovakia cannot ignore Russia's violations of international law, interference in the democratic processes of other states, and efforts to weaken the European security architecture, including the unity of NATO and the EU. Therefore, Slovakia's policy towards Russia will continue to be based on seeking shared interests while also engaging in open critical dialogue on issues where values and interests diverge. The security strategy also mentions that Slovakia will support the application of restrictive measures against the Russian Federation if necessary.³⁸

In Slovakia's national security strategy, China is an important actor and partner in addressing global challenges, an economic and technological competitor, and a "systemic rival" of the European Union. As the document says, China is rapidly increasing its military capabilities and using its economic strength and strategic investments assertively to advance its interests. Beijing promotes its own model of governance and a different understanding of human rights and freedoms. Slovakia takes these factors into account in its mutual relations with China and its positions within international organisations.³⁹

Many overlaps with a few striking differences

The national security strategies of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia all emphasise the importance of their alliances with the United States and the European Union. Also, they all recognise Russia and China as significant players in global and regional security matters. In addition, to a certain extent, all four countries' security strategies take note of the growing strategic rivalry between Washington, Beijing and Moscow, and seek to strengthen their security through NATO and EU membership, strategic partnerships and regional cooperation. However, compared to Hungary, their national security strategies reveal some striking differences in their approaches, particularly in their perceptions

³⁸ Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2021: 24–25.

³⁹ Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2021: 25.

of Russia as a threat, their attitudes toward China⁴⁰ and their priorities in international relations, summarised in Table 1.

Poland and the Czech Republic see Russia as a serious or fundamental security threat, Slovakia takes a more balanced approach, and Hungary takes an especially conciliatory approach towards Moscow. Based on their national security strategies, Poland and the Czech Republic are the closest allies of the United States among the V4 countries, as both consider the U.S. their strategic ally, Russia a threat and China a strategic rival and a systemic challenge. Slovakia is taking the middle ground, considering Washington a strategic ally and China an important actor and partner, but also developing good relations with the Russian Federation while acknowledging that Moscow represents a key security challenge. Hungary alone occupies the other end of the spectrum as it seems closer to the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) than the other three countries, seeking “pragmatic cooperation” and better relations with Moscow and Beijing.⁴¹

Partner or staunch ally

The United States Department of State publishes four-year Integrated Country Strategies (ICS), articulating the U.S. priorities in each country. The Chief of Mission leads this ICS to develop a common set of goals and objectives through a coordinated and collaborative planning effort among the State Department and other government agencies with programming in the country. Higher-level planning documents and strategies inform the ICS, like the U.S. National Security Strategy.⁴² The following pages examine the ICS for Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. At the end of this section, we provide a brief summary and present the main findings in Table 2.

⁴⁰ Regardless of the security strategies of the individual states, China maintains a robust trade relationship with the V4 countries, which favours Beijing. China exported a significant amount of goods to these countries, including electronics, machinery and various manufactured products. For instance, Hungary imported \$10.5 billion of goods from China while exporting \$2.89 billion, primarily in navigation equipment and cars. Poland's imports from China reached \$43.9 billion in 2022, with the main imports being refined copper and gas turbines. In 2023, despite claiming to be wary of Beijing, the Czech Republic also imported \$40.3 billion worth of goods from China (similarly to Poland), while Slovakia's Chinese imports also exceeded \$8.5 billion. For more see OEC 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Trading Economics 2023a, 2023b.

⁴¹ It is worth noting that in NATO's Washington Summit Declaration issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C. on 10 July 2024 – including the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán – the Alliance agreed that “Russia remains the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security”. Moreover, they added that “the People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies continue to challenge our interests, security and values”. Furthermore, the declaration states that “the deepening strategic partnership between Russia and the PRC and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut and reshape the rules-based international order are a cause for profound concern”. In addition, the document notes that “the PRC has become a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine through its so-called ‘no limits’ partnership and its large-scale support for Russia's defence industrial base” which “increases the threat Russia poses to its neighbours and to Euro-Atlantic security” and states that “the PRC continues to pose systemic challenges” (NATO 2024a).

⁴² U.S. Department of State s. a.

Hungary as a partner

The United States and Hungary first established diplomatic relations in 1921, following the dissolution of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy after World War I.⁴³ Later, during World War II, Hungary severed ties to the U.S. and allied with Nazi Germany in 1941. Bilateral relations were re-established only after the end of the war in 1945, while Soviet forces occupied the country and set up a communist regime that lasted for over four decades, despite an uprising in 1956 that the Soviet Union violently crushed. In 1989, after the collapse of communism, the United States supported Hungary in transitioning to a democratic political system and a free market economy. Hungary joined NATO in 1999, the EU in 2004, and the U.S. Visa Waiver Program⁴⁴ in 2008. In 2019, the United States and Hungary signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement⁴⁵ to modernise military cooperation between the two countries. Today, the United States and Hungary cooperate on a wide range of transatlantic and other issues. After Hungary joined the EU in 2004, the United States discontinued bilateral development support. However, Washington still provides security assistance to Hungary through Foreign Military Financing (FMF),⁴⁶ International Military Education and Training (IMET)⁴⁷ and other capacity-building funds, such as the Peacekeeping Operations (PKO)-funded Global Defense Reform Program,⁴⁸ which advises the Hungarian Defence Forces on joint and operational planning. This security aid supports regional stability, assists Hungary in coalition operations, and fosters the continuous development of a flexible, sustainable and interoperable Hungarian military capable of satisfying NATO commitments. In addition, the United States is among

⁴³ Treaty Establishing Friendly Relations Between the United States and Hungary 1922.

⁴⁴ The United States imposed restrictions for Hungarian passport holders under its Visa Waiver Program on 1 August 2023, saying Budapest has not addressed security vulnerabilities repeatedly raised by Washington. According to the U.S., Hungary granted citizenship to about one million people between 2011 and 2020 – mostly ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring states – “without adequate security measures in place to verify their identities”. The validity period offered to Hungarians under the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) was immediately reduced from two years to one year. Now, only single visits are allowed under the system, not multiple. These unprecedented modifications did not apply to any of the other 39 participants in the Visa Waiver Program (THAN 2023).

⁴⁵ Agreement on Defense Cooperation Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Hungary 2019.

⁴⁶ The Arms Export Control Act (AECA), as amended [22 U.S.C. 2751, et. seq.], authorises the President to finance procurement of defence articles and services for foreign countries and international organisations. The FMF enables eligible partner nations to purchase U.S. defence articles, services and training through either FMS or, for a limited number of countries, through the foreign military financing of direct commercial contracts (FMF/DCC) program (U.S. Department of Defense 2024a).

⁴⁷ Among the goals of IMET are to train future leaders, create a better understanding of the United States, establish rapport between the U.S. military and the country's military to build alliances for the future, and enhance interoperability and capabilities for joint operations (U.S. Department of Defense 2024b).

⁴⁸ The Global Defense Reform Program (GDRP) is a flexible PKO-funded program that seeks to improve security sector governance and institutional capacity of select U.S. partners at the service, ministerial and national levels (U.S. Department of State 2024b).

the leading foreign investors, and U.S. investment supports more than 100,000 jobs in Hungary,⁴⁹ which has had a direct, positive impact on the Hungarian economy.⁵⁰

As per the Chief of Mission Priorities articulated in the 14-page U.S. Integrated Country Strategy for Hungary, the United States faces many diverse global challenges to defend and renew the foundations of security, prosperity and democracy, and Americans and Europeans have the chance to restore our well-being and shape the economy of tomorrow, seizing the opportunity to show that “democracies can deliver”. According to the United States, Hungary can be a partner in these efforts as a NATO Ally, EU member, and trade and investment partner. Russia’s aggressive behaviour in the region made taking advantage of all the possibilities even more important. As the document puts it, the United States and Hungary have a long-standing relationship with important shared security and economic interests. Hungary has made valuable contributions by joining NATO Allies in missions abroad and modernising its military. The United States aims to revitalise the NATO Alliance and seeks Hungary’s full support to strengthen the transatlantic partnership. The mission is to work with Hungary to make it a more capable NATO ally, actively participating in NATO and bilateral deterrence activities and military exercises.⁵¹

The U.S. Integrated Country Strategy emphasises the economic opportunities in the American–Hungarian partnership. It suggests that we can work to strengthen our economic and technological cooperation, which can lead to significant growth and diversification. These opportunities are important for shaping both countries’ economies in line with U.S. interests and values. Additionally, they provide a chance to diversify away from energy markets influenced by autocratic regimes and to protect our critical infrastructure from technologies that might compromise security. As a reference to China and Russia, the document notes that working together in this manner can help insulate Hungary and the transatlantic community from the efforts of geopolitical powers that seek to undermine the international rules-based order.⁵²

The document underscores that democratic values lie at the foundation of U.S. foreign policy. Bolstering human rights and democratic values is not just a priority, but an essential element to the long-term health of the alliance and bilateral relationship between the United States and Hungary. The rule of law, democratic backsliding and corruption are priority areas for the United States in Hungary. Several U.S. administrations in the United States have viewed the erosion of certain aspects of the rule of law in Hungary with concern. The United States is working with European partners, multilateral organisations and Hungarians to foster free and fair elections, and the U.S. mission is ready to cooperate

⁴⁹ It is worth mentioning that the U.S. Department of the Treasury terminated a 1979 tax treaty with Hungary to pressure Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to agree to implement the 15% global minimum tax agreed by nearly 140 countries. The United States notified Hungary on 8 July 2022, of its termination of the Convention between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Hungarian People’s Republic for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes on Income. The termination itself has become effective on 8 January 2023, and the Convention has ceased to have effect on 1 January 2024 (Reuters 2022; U.S. Department of the Treasury 2022).

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State 2021a.

⁵¹ Integrated Country Strategy: Hungary 2022: 1–2.

⁵² Integrated Country Strategy: Hungary 2022: 2.

with Hungarian officials at any level to combat corruption. The United States encourages Hungary to cooperate in efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law globally.⁵³

Describing the U.S. Mission Goals and Objectives, the ICS notes that as a NATO Ally, Hungary should give full political support to NATO's engagement with its Alliance partner Ukraine and other NATO deterrence efforts and highlights the fact that a failure to secure Hungary's full support for NATO will perpetuate Hungary's block on high-level NATO engagement with Ukraine and that Hungary could also block other NATO responses to emerging challenges.⁵⁴ As another risk, the ICS mentions that Hungary could also veto EU and NATO cooperation with the United States in certain areas (like efforts to compete with revisionist powers). As the document puts it, failure to coordinate with European Allies, including Hungary, in the Western Balkans could threaten regional stability and enhance the influence of non-democratic outside actors.⁵⁵

Poland as a loyal ally

Poland is a "stalwart ally" of the United States and one of its strongest partners in Central Europe in fostering security and prosperity regionally, throughout Europe and the world. The United States and Poland cooperate closely on NATO capabilities, counterterrorism, non-proliferation, missile defence, human rights, economic growth and innovation, energy security, and regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland plays a crucial role in NATO operations, hosting various NATO headquarters and units, meeting defence spending commitments and contributing to operations abroad. The country also hosts thousands of U.S. military personnel,⁵⁶ facilitates military exercises, and enables a more significant rotational U.S. presence under the 2020 U.S.–Poland Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA).⁵⁷

In contrast to the reference to Hungary as a partner, the Chief of Mission Priorities in the 35-page U.S. Integrated Country Strategy for Poland refers to Poland as a "staunch U.S. Ally" and a "strategic partner" on NATO's eastern flank. As the ICS for Poland puts it, the United States' relations with Poland are "surging across the board", driven by a profound strategic commonality that links national interests with universal values, including democracy and the rule of law. According to the document, the bilateral affection is further deepened by their history, close cultural affinities and strong economic ties, laying the groundwork for an ambitious blueprint to strengthen the American–Polish

⁵³ Integrated Country Strategy: Hungary 2022: 2.

⁵⁴ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Budapest on 12 June 2024, to discuss preparations for the Washington Summit. Following Stoltenberg's visit, Hungary agreed not to veto NATO support for Ukraine. However, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán insisted that his government would not provide funds or military personnel for any joint assistance effort (Cook 2024).

⁵⁵ Integrated Country Strategy: Hungary 2022: 6–7.

⁵⁶ According to the Department of State, in total, Poland hosted approximately 4,500 rotational U.S. military personnel on any given day in 2021 (U.S. Department of State 2021b).

⁵⁷ The EDCA enables a more prominent rotational U.S. presence in Poland and lays out Warsaw's burden-sharing support to U.S. forces. For more, see the Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Poland on Enhanced Defense Cooperation 2020.

partnership through joint, practical action. The country strategy emphasises that by focusing on what is possible, the United States and Poland could increase their bilateral trade volumes to the highest levels in their history. Their top scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs could collaborate to address climate change and combat infectious diseases. Working together, they can shorten the transition from Poland's reliance on coal to greener energy sources, thereby reducing their carbon footprint. Strengthening security ties can lead to a more robust Poland contributing to collective security. In addition, the United States supports Poland's goal of becoming a top-tier NATO Ally and the primary regional leader in collective defence.⁵⁸

Regarding the security cooperation, as the ICS mentions, the U.S.–Poland shared commitment to freedom dates back to the American Revolution when Polish heroes such as Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski aided the American cause. The United States was the first country to recognise independent Poland in 1919. Today, Poland remains a stalwart Ally and one of the United States' strongest partners in fostering security regionally and globally. The United States and Poland partner closely on NATO capabilities, counterterrorism, non-proliferation, missile defence, border security, transnational crime and combatting cyber threats. Poland is in the middle of a multi-year (2020–2035), \$133 billion military modernisation program and was one of only a handful of Allies meeting NATO guidelines to spend 2% of GDP on defence and 20 of defence spending on modernising equipment and infrastructure in 2022. Poland jointly hosts the NATO Multinational Corps and Division Northeast Headquarters and the forward command post of the U.S. Army's newly established V Corps headquarters. A U.S. aviation detachment is located in Poland, and the country is hosting a ballistic missile defence site under the European Phased Adaptive Approach.⁵⁹ In July 2024, after years of development, the Aegis Ashore missile defence site in northern Poland (Redzikowo) finally reached operational status.⁶⁰ Poland's cyber capacity is growing and will help improve the Polish Government's nascent preparedness for potential domestic and transient attacks. The country strategy notes that the United States and Poland are addressing traditional and emerging threats to provide regional, European and global security.⁶¹

Describing the U.S. Mission Goals and Objectives in Poland, the respective ICS notes that a failure to continue setting conditions for enhanced U.S. military presence and supporting Poland's military modernisation program would reduce bilateral military cooperation and slow Poland's military modernisation efforts. This failure would weaken NATO's ability to deter and, if necessary, resist aggression on the Alliance's eastern flank. Among other objectives, the United States would like to improve Poland's ability to address cyber threats, and a failure to continue cooperation with Poland in cybersecurity would mean greater exposure to cyber threats from malign actors.⁶² Another risk the document identifies concerns improving Poland's energy security, which is necessary if the country

⁵⁸ Integrated Country Strategy: Poland 2022: 1.

⁵⁹ JUDSON 2024; Naval Sea Systems Command 2024.

⁶⁰ NATO 2024b.

⁶¹ Integrated Country Strategy: Poland 2022: 1–2.

⁶² Integrated Country Strategy: Poland 2022: 13.

does not want to remain vulnerable to pressure from outside influences. As the country strategy notes, should malign actors seek to restrict Poland's access to energy supplies, it could cause political and social instability and have serious economic consequences.⁶³

The Czech Republic, a steadfast ally

According to the 21-page Integrated Country Strategy for the Czech Republic, the United States considers Prague a “steadfast ally” and a “like-minded partner”. In the Chief of Mission Priorities, the document says that the Czechs are among the most enthusiastic partners of the United States in standing firm against authoritarianism and advocating democracy. The document notes that the Czech Republic's outspoken and passionate support for Ukrainian sovereignty makes this more evident than anywhere else. The United States supports the Czech Government's efforts to meet its NATO budget and capability targets. Both countries are collaborating to address global challenges by combatting misinformation, strengthening cyber defences, and enhancing security and stability worldwide. Additionally, efforts are being made to identify opportunities for U.S. defence firms to promote interoperability and commercial prospects for U.S. exporters through engagement with Czech officials.⁶⁴

The Czech Republic and the United States aim to strengthen their technology, research and innovation partnership. They are working on establishing smart regulations for the digital economy to maintain oversight of global technology networks and promote access to U.S. products and services. Additionally, they are focusing on promoting trade and investment, especially in technology, defence, agriculture and tourism, to create and preserve jobs in both countries. As the Czech Republic is transitioning from coal, it needs to build new nuclear power generation facilities and tap new renewable energy sources. Prague is coordinating closely with the United States to address its energy needs using U.S. commercial technology. To assist the Czech Republic in addressing the growing efforts of authoritarian regimes to destabilise the country and its institutions through propaganda, disinformation, economic coercion and other harmful activities, the United States is collaborating with the Czech Government, media and civil society partners to identify, counter and protect the Czech society against these threats.⁶⁵

In the section describing the Mission Goals and Objectives, the ICS mentions the risk of the Czech Republic not reaching the NATO budget and capability commitments, which is essential to help the Alliance sustain its deterrence and defence posture against global threats. Another U.S. objective focuses on Czechs advocating for policies within the European Union and other multilateral organisations that strengthen the transatlantic relationship and combat global challenges. As the document highlights, without the European Union as a strong and like-minded partner of the United States to tackle global challenges, the U.S. risks being unable to address critical issues such as Russian aggression

⁶³ Integrated Country Strategy: Poland 2022: 19.

⁶⁴ Integrated Country Strategy: Czech Republic 2022: 1–2.

⁶⁵ Integrated Country Strategy: Czech Republic 2022: 2.

and China's malign influence. Moscow and Beijing may seek to drive wedges in EU and NATO unity and promote their authoritarian worldview in multilateral bodies, which would harm U.S. interests. In addition, the United States supports the Czech Government in improving its ability to identify and combat disinformation and build resilience against malign information operations.⁶⁶

Slovakia as an important ally

The 18-page U.S. Integrated Country Strategy for Slovakia refers to the Slovak Republic as an “important NATO ally” and an EU member state. Among the Chief of Mission Priorities, the document notes that in recent years, Slovakia has faced quickly changing geopolitical, economic and security landscapes as Central Europe has become a highly contested space increasingly under external pressure. Disinformation campaigns, influence operations, conventional and hybrid threats, and emerging disruptive technologies build on weaknesses in Slovakia's education system and a general lack of opportunities, threatening U.S. and European security in Europe and beyond. In addition, Russian efforts to undermine democratic institutions risk turning back the possibilities of Slovakia enacting much-needed anti-corruption reforms. Democratic backsliding has taken a toll regionally in general. As the ICS highlights, in this context, Slovakia's dedication to democratic ideals and its transatlantic identity is critically important in its neighbourhood and the EU, NATO and beyond.⁶⁷

The document also stresses that Slovakia's role as a significant democratic model is at risk because a considerable portion of the population relies on disinformation sources and online conspiracy theories as their primary source of information. The ICS describes Slovakia as being at a crucial point regarding its geopolitical positioning. Its increasing desire to play a key role in the transatlantic community is being tested by a rising threat from the eastern direction, which could disrupt Europe and weaken the “values we all hold dear”. Therefore, the primary goal of the U.S. Mission in Slovakia, is to expand bilateral and multilateral cooperation to bolster regional and global security and stability and address hybrid threats, so Slovakia can become a more active and capable partner in confronting the challenges the West is facing. The secondary goal of the U.S. – to strengthen Slovakia's resilience and responsiveness to its democratic institutions – is to keep Slovakia a stable partner and bulwark against the regional erosion of democratic ideals. According to the ICS, the United States intends to engage the Slovak public to build support for shared values and endeavour to reinforce Slovakia's commitment to the West and the common transatlantic identity. In this regard, the document notes that significant segments of Slovak society do not identify their country as fully anchored in the West, increasing Slovakia's vulnerability to the Russian Government's efforts to erode support for Slovakia's Western orientation and democratic institutions.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Integrated Country Strategy: Czech Republic 2022: 7–8.

⁶⁷ Integrated Country Strategy: Slovak Republic 2022: 1.

⁶⁸ Integrated Country Strategy: Slovak Republic 2022: 3.

Table 2: The main findings of the United States Department of State's integrated country strategies for Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Hungary	Hungary can be a <i>partner</i> in U.S. efforts to defend and renew the foundations of democracy and security as a NATO Ally, EU member, and trade and investment partner. Russia's aggressive behaviour in the region made taking advantage of all the possibilities even more important. The rule of law, democratic backsliding and corruption are priority areas for the United States. The erosion of certain aspects of the rule of law in Hungary is a major concern.
Poland	The United States sees Poland as a <i>staunch ally</i> and a <i>strategic partner</i> on NATO's eastern flank. Polish–American relations are “surging across the board”, driven by a profound strategic commonality that links national interests with universal values, including democracy and the rule of law. The bilateral affection is further deepened by their history, close cultural affinities and strong economic ties. The United States and Poland partner closely on NATO capabilities, counterterrorism, non-proliferation, missile defence, border security, transnational crime and combatting cyber threats.
Czech Republic	Prague is a <i>steadfast ally</i> and a <i>like-minded partner</i> of the United States. The Czechs are among the most enthusiastic partners of the U.S. in standing firm against authoritarianism and advocating democracy. The two countries are collaborating to address global challenges by combatting misinformation, strengthening cyber defence, and enhancing security and stability worldwide.
Slovakia	The Slovak Republic is an <i>important NATO ally</i> and an EU member state in the eyes of the United States. Slovakia has faced quickly changing geopolitical, economic and security landscapes as Central Europe has become a highly contested space increasingly under external pressure. Russian efforts to undermine democratic institutions risk turning back the possibilities of Slovakia enacting much-needed anti-corruption reforms. Democratic backsliding has taken a toll regionally in general. Slovakia's dedication to democratic ideals and its transatlantic identity is critical. Slovakia is at a crucial point in terms of its geopolitical positioning. Therefore, expanding bilateral and multilateral cooperation to strengthen regional and global security and stability and confront hybrid threats is a priority for the United States.

Source: *Integrated Country Strategy: Hungary 2022; Integrated Country Strategy: Poland 2022; Integrated Country Strategy: Czech Republic 2022; Integrated Country Strategy: Slovak Republic 2022*

Describing the U.S. Mission Goals and Objectives in Slovakia, the respective ICS identifies expanding bilateral and multilateral cooperation to strengthen regional and global security and stability and confront hybrid threats as the primary mission goal. In this regard, the document notes that nationalism, far-right extremism and Russian disinformation campaigns undermine public support for Slovakia's Western orientation and its membership in the EU, NATO and other transatlantic institutions. Another risk the ICS mentions is the failure to uphold and advocate for key transatlantic values in regional organisations and in domestic actions, which – as the ICS puts it – would damage Slovakia's international standing. The country strategy goes further and says that in this case, Slovakia “would be grouped with other backsliding V4 members and viewed as a block on EU progress in key democratization and rule of law issues”, which is most probably a reference to Hungary and Poland before Donald Tusk's return as Polish Prime Minister at the end of 2023. Regarding Slovakia's vulnerability to hybrid threats – including disinformation and cyber threats – the document states that without concrete steps to mitigate the impact

of these threats, Slovak opposition will continue to undermine public confidence in Slovak institutions and weaken the government by discrediting Western values and the transatlantic alliance.⁶⁹ In addition, the document acknowledges that the lack of resilient, democratic institutions and reforms to fight corruption to increase public trust will bolster authoritarian and extremist political movements and make Slovakia more susceptible to external influences. The ICS also notes that a failure to protect the vital role of the media and civil society could degrade democracy and empower anti-Western forces in the country.⁷⁰

A summary of the U.S. perspective vis-à-vis the V4 countries

The U.S. Integrated Country Strategies for Hungary and Poland highlight the importance of strengthening relationships with these countries. Both strategies emphasise the significance of democratic values and human rights and the need to counteract aggressive behaviour from geopolitical powers such as Russia and China. They also stress the importance of economic and technological cooperation to benefit the U.S. and the respective countries. However, the ICS for Hungary mainly positions Budapest as a partner in addressing global challenges, while the one for Poland describes Warsaw as a staunch U.S. ally and a strategic partner on NATO's eastern flank. The focus on Poland's role as a key ally in NATO sets it apart from the description of Hungary as a partner. Additionally, the ICS for Poland emphasises the deep historical, cultural and economic ties that strengthen the American–Polish partnership, while the ICS for Hungary primarily focuses on Hungary's potential to contribute as a NATO ally and an EU partner. Overall, while both ICSs mentioned above share common themes related to democratic values, human rights and economic collaboration, the specific emphasis and positioning of each country set them apart. This is even though, according to Hungary's National Security Strategy, the “Hungarian and Polish nations are linked by a thousand years of shared history and brotherhood-in-arms”, and Hungary “strives to maintain a strategic partnership with the Republic of Poland”.⁷¹

The U.S. Integrated Country Strategies for the Czech Republic and Slovakia emphasise the importance of democratic ideals, transatlantic relations and combatting global challenges. Both countries face threats such as disinformation, cyberattacks and regional instability and are considered crucial allies by the United States. More precisely, the Czech Republic is seen as a steadfast ally and like-minded partner of Washington, fully dedicated to supporting Ukrainian sovereignty, meeting NATO commitments, collaborating on technology, research and innovation, and addressing energy needs using U.S. commercial technology. The ICS also highlights the Czech Republic's outspoken

⁶⁹ Integrated Country Strategy: Slovak Republic 2022: 7–9.

⁷⁰ Integrated Country Strategy: Slovak Republic 2022: 11.

⁷¹ Hungary's National Security Strategy 2020: paragraph 111. Speaking at a festival in Tusnádfürdő, Romania, on 27 July 2024, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán commented on Poland, saying the Poles are “pursuing the most hypocritical and deceitful policy in Europe”: they are lecturing Hungary morally and criticising the Hungarian Government for Hungary's relations with Russia, while at the same time, Poland is also buying gas from Russia, albeit indirectly (JOÓB – HORVÁTH KÁVAI 2024).

support for U.S. interests and the need for the European Union as a strong and like-minded partner. Regarding Slovakia, the ICS emphasises the country's dedication to democratic ideals and its transatlantic identity. At the same time, it underscores the risk of increasing threats from the East disrupting Europe and weakening shared values. The ICS aims to expand bilateral and multilateral cooperation to bolster regional and global security and stability. In addition, the U.S. ICS highlights the risk of increasing disinformation and online conspiracy theories as a primary source of information in Slovakia.

In regard to foreign policy towards Moscow and Beijing, the U.S. is concerned about Russian and Chinese influence and their efforts to undermine democratic institutions. The United States has expressed concern about Hungary's "too close" relationship with Russia several times in recent years.⁷² The ICS for the Czech Republic highlights the importance of addressing these threats with the European Union and NATO, and improving its ability to combat disinformation. Meanwhile, regarding Slovakia, the respective country strategy highlights the need to address disinformation campaigns, influence operations and hybrid threats, and it also aims to become a more active and capable partner in responding to these challenges.

Conclusion

After analysing the national security strategies of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, it is evident that the Visegrád Group countries have distinct approaches to their relationships with the United States, Russia and China. The recent breakdown of relations within the V4 countries, primarily stemming from their responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, made the fundamental differences in their security strategies apparent. This rupture has resulted in a division within the group, with Poland and the Czech Republic forming a pro-Ukraine block and Hungary – joined in rhetoric by Slovakia with Robert Fico's return to power – comprising a Ukraine-sceptic block. Furthermore, Hungary stands out as an outlier among the V4 countries since it aims to pursue pragmatic cooperation with Russia and China amid the deterioration of relations with the United

⁷² In October 2023, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán met Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. He was the only EU leader to attend the forum or to maintain close ties with Moscow since Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In response, U.S. Ambassador to Hungary David Pressman issued a statement expressing the United States' concerns about Hungary's relationship with Russia. This has occurred after a year-long deterioration in relations between Budapest and Washington, primarily due to Hungary's extended delays in ratifying Sweden's NATO membership. Pressman has for months criticised Orbán for effectively siding with Putin over the war in Ukraine. By March 2024, his remarks indicated that trust in Hungary among NATO allies had effectively collapsed. The U.S. Ambassador to Budapest warned that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is jeopardising Hungary's position as a trusted NATO ally with "its close and expanding relationship with Russia", and with "dangerously unhinged anti-American messaging" in state-controlled media. The Hungarian Prime Minister sparked controversy when he visited Ukraine, Russia and China consecutively as part of a "peace mission" for Ukraine – as the Hungarian Government called it – right after Hungary began its six-month rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union in July 2024, giving Orbán a higher profile (GYÓRI 2023; HIGGINS 2024; TROIANOVSKI–HIGGINS 2024; BUCKLEY–HIGGINS 2024).

States. In addition, Hungary's example shows that going against the pro-Ukrainian camp can draw heavy criticism.⁷³

The divergence in views within the Visegrád Group has implications for the V4 countries' future interactions with each other, and this division will also be visible when it comes to these countries' bilateral relations with the United States, Russia and China in the future. While the pro-Ukraine countries intend to maintain close cooperation with Washington, the Ukraine-sceptic countries are critical of Western policies supporting Ukraine. This contrasting stance can have significant ramifications in light of the strategic importance of the Central European region, particularly as part of NATO's eastern flank.

Considering how the V4 countries' differing perspectives regarding the United States, Russia and China are reflected in their national security strategies, this recent rupture within the Visegrád Group or the deterioration of U.S.–Hungarian relations and the improvement of the U.S.–Polish relations is not that surprising. The nature of these references sheds light on whether these great powers are viewed as close allies, reliable partners, or security threats. This comparative analysis highlights the complexities and divisions within the Visegrád Group. However, it also points out the dynamic nature of international relations.

In our analysis, we did not go deeper into the geopolitical events of recent years, the internal political developments that occurred in individual countries or government changes. The analysis of the deterioration of the strategic environment, domestic events and shifts in foreign policy could be the topic of further research. Also, examining the bilateral relations between V4 countries and Russia or China could help us better understand our region's current state of affairs. In the meantime, we may expect a new national security strategy from certain V4 member states that would better reflect recent years' developments.

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⁷³ According to the Hungarian Prime Minister, Russia's leadership was "hyper-rational", and Ukraine would never be able to fulfil its hopes of becoming a member of the European Union or NATO. Viktor Orbán forecasts a shift in global power away from the "irrational" West towards Asia and Russia. As he put it in a speech in July: "In the next long decades, maybe centuries, Asia will be the dominant center of the world" (Reuters 2024).

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