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Enabling Factors of Deepening the Visegrád 4 Defence Cooperation²

The Visegrád countries occasionally step up as a “political block” through highly visible political declarations and began to practically expand their cooperation to include defence after 2011. This has often been considered a breakthrough achievement, but the long-term strategic prospects, the “depth” of this new formation of sub-regional defence cooperation is scarcely analysed. Based on European lessons learnt, this study offers a novel qualitative analysis focusing on the V4, measuring their cooperation in the light of enabling conditions of successful defence cooperation in the period 1999–2019. Reflecting on significant shortcomings identified, the author argues that much remains to be done if the V4’s ambitious strategic plans on defence, outlined until 2032, are to be realised, particularly regarding political and technical conditions.

Keywords: Visegrád countries, Central Europe, defence cooperation, armed forces, strategy

Introduction

Central European sub-regional defence cooperation initiatives emerged only after the 2008 economic crisis and started to gain scholarly attention afterwards. The cooperation of the Visegrád countries, active since 1991, created a definite defence policy dimension from January 2011, becoming more and more ambitious throughout the years and drawing up long-term strategic plans for deepening this cooperation up until 2032. However, the long-term strategic prospects, the “depth” of the cooperation has not been analysed yet. Without such analysis, it is hard to judge, whether the cooperation of the V4 in the field of defence bears the prospects of elaborated, truly aligned and meaningful, mutually strengthening relations, having a solid value and interest-based fundament, or more driven forward by spectacular but empty or half-hearted political declarations and limited military pragmatism. Not only from academic and analytical points of view, but also for its policy relevance, understanding the coherence (or divergence) of enabling conditions for such strategic cooperation is important, though uncovered so far.

To name a clear-cut example: one can observe a contradiction between the highly visible defence cooperation that is attractive to sell in political communication,³ and the low-key practical deliverables that the V4 yielded so far, if we take a closer look even at the

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³ WEISS 2012; LORENZ 2013; SUPLATA 2013a.

most significant achievement, the V4 EU Battlegroup.⁴ Despite the triumphant communication that sold the establishment of the V4 BG, the main shortcoming in this regard is that the Battlegroups, along their current rules of engagement, are dysfunctional. This is shown by the fact that they have never been deployed by the European Union to any crisis management operation. The reasons for this are manifold: the lack of political consensus about the need and mandate of deployment as well as the rules of (military) engagement, the unfavourable financing mechanism that puts much of the financial burden on the participating states, diminishing their will to participate, and the potential capability shortcomings that make deployment and sustained action much of a challenge.⁵ These issues had not successfully been addressed by the V4 either, moreover, their international ambitions in these regards significantly differ (learn more about their strategic culture and international goals below in this paper). Despite this, as defence cooperation had become a hot topic both within NATO and at the EU level after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, V4 leaders could use the opportunity and the high visibility of this “flagship project” to highlight their united efforts as a political block. This image became handy during their political quarrels with EU institutions regarding immigration, border security, internal security, rule of law etc. issues in subsequent years. This has been a low-risk achievement, as the establishment of the joint unit required limited effort, yet it yielded maximum political capital, while still there is no realistic option that among the current circumstances any EU BG would/could be deployed due to political and financial obstacles. However, establishing their long-term defence cooperation on political communication and short-term political yield would be a mistake. This paper will outline what more needs to be added and developed along the international lessons learnt from successful examples of regional defence cooperation.

Therefore, after outlining the motives for proliferating multinational defence cooperation in Europe and particularly in Central Europe, this paper provides an overview of the development of sub-regional defence cooperation of the V4. Having this focus, the author aims at offering a qualitative case study analysis of the 14 enabling conditions of successful defence cooperation identified by Valásek⁶ and Zandee et al.,⁷ aligned in 3 groups (strategic, political, technical enablers) to estimate the realisation prospects of the V4's future plans. Based on examining a broad cluster of practical examples of multinational defence cooperation and their lessons learnt, these conditions had been identified as the following: the similarity of strategic cultures; trust and solidarity; similar sizes and specificities of the armed forces; comparable defence industries; low corruption in the defence sphere; realism, clarity and seriousness of intentions; sovereignty and autonomy; geography and historical background; the number of partners; simultaneous top-down political and military leadership and bottom-up engagement; mindset, defence culture and organisation; defence planning alignment; standardisation and interoperability; and the involvement of parliaments.

⁴ CSIKI 2017: 177–178.

⁵ MAJOR–MÖLLING 2011; HATZIGEORGOPOULOS 2012; REYKERS 2017.

⁶ VALÁSEK 2011: 21–26.

⁷ ZANDEE et al. 2016: 4–6.

The qualitative analysis of these conditions serves to answer the question: What is the “strategic depth” of the Visegrád defence cooperation considering the long-term plans that had been drafted up until 2032? The author will argue that much remains to be done, especially in the field of creating joint capability planning, developing the parliamentary dimension of the cooperation, and harmonising decision-making that would move the cooperation beyond the pooling of capabilities towards deeper formats, such as joint acquisitions or role and task sharing.

Based on the currently available literature, there are fundamental elements of this cooperation that lack scholarly research – to which the current paper will offer remedy within the boundaries of available information. First, the Visegrád 4’s strategic culture has not been compared systematically yet, this paper will offer a concise comprehensive assessment. Second, there are sporadic empirical studies, public opinion polls available on trust and solidarity towards each other regarding both the population and policy shapers of the V4, and this study will summarise and compare some of these to get a more complete picture. Third, several technical aspects of the cooperation, identified as enabling conditions, have not been examined yet, such as the specificities of armed forces (size, force profile, mission goals, international affiliation), production capabilities of national defence industries, or the risks of defence corruption. Based on the limited available information, this paper will start the analytical process that should be further elaborated by focused in-depth research. Fourth, further enabling conditions had not been examined even superficially yet, most likely due to the lack of available information or difficult access to information regarding the four countries’ national defence establishments and militaries. These include top-down political and military leadership and bottom-up engagement, the alignment of defence culture and organisation, as well as of defence planning; the interoperability of the armed forces and the involvement of national parliaments. The aim of this paper is to signal the need of continued elaborated research regarding these aspects, while offering general assessment where possible.

To offer a comprehensive evaluative framework for the V4 defence cooperation and provide in-depth answer to the research question, first the study explains how multinational defence cooperation has become an important policy field and scholarly research topic with a Central European focus. Then following the outline of the research methodology, the so far achieved results of this cooperative format are listed, identifying the scale of intensity of these activities, and pointing out that there is still much way forward to go in order to create elaborated in-depth cooperation. Finally, the analysis of those enabling conditions follows, that could make such deeper cooperation happen, pointing out the specific strategic, political, and technical aspects that are still missing.

How has studying multinational defence cooperation gained relevance in (Central) Europe?

Multinational activities aimed at defence capability development have been multiplying in Europe after the Cold War ended, through regional (pan-European), as well as

sub-regional⁸ initiatives (NORDEFECO, Baltic defence cooperation, Central European cooperation initiatives) both in multilateral and bilateral frameworks, first within NATO during the 1990s, then also in the European Union after the turn of the millennium. Since then capability development has been broadened and deepened throughout Europe in various aspects. On the one hand, greater roles were given to minilateral,⁹ sub-regional formats of cooperation, uniting a small number of states in a joint effort, besides comprehensive NATO and EU initiatives. Thus, also those sub-regions – like Central Europe – could newly design, form and join multinational defence cooperation projects, that had not been active in this field before. While on the other hand, multinational defence cooperation programs have encompassed more and more areas and evolved into more complex forms. After the turn of the millennium both regional organisations began to coordinate multinational defence cooperation more closely and align it with their capability planning systems (the NATO Defence Planning Process on behalf of NATO, Headline Goals, European Capability Planning, Permanent Structured Cooperation on behalf of the EU). These gained further political support as a result of the resource scarcity caused by the effects of the 2008–2009 financial and economic crisis.

Scholarly research on preserving and developing military capabilities in the post-bipolar era can rely on a wide basis of academic literature.¹⁰ As these sources show, comprehensive, systemic research in this field has been induced by practical problems, as intensifying multinational military capability development has been triggered by numerous factors: emerging challenges from a continually transforming security environment;¹¹ the need for joint action to tackle emerging crises;¹² the will for establishing European strategic autonomy;¹³ decreasing defence funds,¹⁴ increasing defence inflation,¹⁵ resource-intensive research and development in the defence sector,¹⁶ as well as symbolic reasons.¹⁷ Based on this literature, we can say that there are generally two approaches for studying European (regional) defence cooperation: on the one hand examining institutionalised processes within the European Union and NATO in a top-down manner, while on the other hand through identifying and analysing converging national interests and the ensuing practical

⁸ The notions of 'region' and 'sub-region' vary across the academic literature depending on whether the analytical unit, 'region' was interpreted in the wider sense as Eurasia (regional security complexes theory or the approach of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and the Transatlantic region, within which Europe itself would be a sub-region; or the analytical framework is Europe as a region, within which smaller geographical units, such as Central Europe are identified as 'sub-regions'. In this paper I use the terminology 'Central European sub-regional defence cooperation', referring to cooperative formats within this sub-region of Europe.

⁹ See MORET 2016: 2.

¹⁰ PALIN 1995; MOSKOS et al. 2000; ALEXANDER–GARDEN 2001; JONES 2007; HARTLEY 2006; MÉRAND 2008; MATLARY 2009; KING 2005; BISCOP 2013, BISCOP–COELMONT 2013; MAJOR–MÖLLING 2013; MISSIROLI et al. 2013; NÉMETH 2014.

¹¹ JONES 2007.

¹² MÉRAND 2008; BISCOP 2013.

¹³ MAJOR–MÖLLING 2013; MISSIROLI et al. 2013.

¹⁴ KING 2005.

¹⁵ ALEXANDER–GARDEN 2001.

¹⁶ HARTLEY 2006.

¹⁷ STEIN 1993; PALIN 1995.

cooperation that emerges in a bottom-up manner. This paper follows the latter endeavour of understanding bottom-up initiatives, focusing on the Visegrád countries.

Moreover, we could also witness several cases of sub-regional defence cooperation dating back to the Cold War.¹⁸ By now the cooperation of the Nordic states (NORDEF) has become the most developed and complex sub-regional defence cooperation framework in Europe.¹⁹ Compared to these, Central European sub-regional defence cooperation initiatives emerged much later, and have not gained notable scholarly attention before the 2008 economic crisis. The Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC/CEDI)²⁰ gained momentum from October 2010,²¹ while the Visegrád cooperation became more active from January 2011, also gaining more scholarly attention both in a descriptive and comparative manner, primarily from regional experts.²² These sources shed some light on the motives and drivers of the cooperation, some²³ also offer policy recommendations for broadening and deepening various aspects of the cooperation, though the necessary conditions for achieving success are not examined.

Based on this overview of literature we can conclude that the Visegrád countries' defence cooperation has been gaining more scholarly attention, but systemic analyses on its drivers and prospects are missing. One such endeavour was the elaborate work undertaken previously by Csiki²⁴ that examined the Visegrád 4's strategic culture, threat perception, converging or diverging national defence interests and the ensuing practical cooperation in a bottom-up manner.

Following upon this exploratory work and extending the focus of examination to the 14 enabling conditions of successful defence cooperation identified by Valásek²⁵ and Zandee et al.,²⁶ this paper is aimed at pointing out where the gaps are and if the promise of integration actually corresponds to the political proclamations in the case of the V4. These enabling factors are aligned here in 3 groups (strategic, political, technical enablers), and the following parts will offer an overview of the broadening and deepening of the V4 cooperation in the field of defence in order to map up the foundations and future strategic directions of the cooperation for which political commitment has already been undertaken. First, a qualitative analysis will evaluate the intensity of the cooperation along the scale of various pooling and sharing solutions for military capabilities to show

¹⁸ BAILES 1999; COTTEY 1999, 2000.

¹⁹ BÁTORA–MATLARY 2012; JÄRVENPÄÄ 2017.

²⁰ Central European Defence Cooperation (earlier Central European Roundtable on Defence Cooperation, currently also as Central European Defence Initiative – CEDI) is a non-institutionalised defence collaboration framework among Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia in which participating states discuss and realise practical initiatives for defence capability development that can be realised on the ground in the short term (CSIKI–NÉMETH 2011: 15).

²¹ MOLNÁR–CSIKI 2010; CSIKI–NÉMETH 2012.

²² KRON–BALOGH 2012; BALOGH 2013; MADEJ 2013; VALÁSEK–SUPLATA 2012; SUPLATA 2013b; MAJER 2015.

²³ VALÁSEK–SUPLATA 2012; SUPLATA 2013b; MAJER 2015.

²⁴ CSIKI 2017.

²⁵ VALÁSEK 2011: 21–26.

²⁶ ZANDEE et al. 2016: 4–6.

the limits of the achieved results versus the room for possible extension in the future. This is followed by the evaluation of the 14 enabling conditions that would increase the chances of realising the adopted long-term plans.

Research methodology

The methodology of the paper rests on two pillars. First, the content and intensity of the cooperation will be mapped up, then a qualitative assessment will be undertaken to uncover what future prospect the V4 cooperation might hold in the light of lessons learnt from existing European multinational defence cooperation formats.

As the first step, the overview of the evolving defence cooperation of the Visegrád countries in the next sub-section will scale the intensity of the cooperation. The analysed period spans 20 years, from the end of the 1990s, when the harmonisation of their foreign policies was articulated as a shared aim and the first defence ministerial was also held (1999), until 2019 when the V4 EU Battlegroup was on standby for the last time. The intensity of the cooperation is evaluated with regards to the broader theoretical categories of capability pooling and sharing: 1. sharing of capabilities; 2. pooling of capabilities; 3. pooling through acquisition; and 4. role and task sharing.²⁷ Within these the first category, the sharing of capabilities (1) is the least intensive, giving up minimal national sovereignty for the sake of cooperation (e.g. the coordination of training and maintenance activities), not integrating force structures or sharing any command and control authorities, thus creating only very limited dependence on the partners. Going further, when the pooling of capabilities (2) occurs, some national capabilities are integrated into a joint force structure of the participating countries, while the command of the forces remains under national control. In these cases (e.g. when creating multinational units, such as an EU Battlegroup), it is the coordinated force planning process that decreases personnel and logistics costs. Pooling through acquisition (3) takes place when partner countries align their force development to such an extent that those capabilities that are lacking from their national armed forces but are deemed necessary are procured and then operated together with joint funds (e.g. NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability). Either realised through joint acquisition (of available off-the-shelf equipment) or co-development (of new equipment), this results not only in the reduction of costs for the individual nations, but also in a significant degree of sovereignty sharing, namely dependences on the others. The most intense form of cooperation, role and task sharing (4) would require the highest level of trust and results in the highest degree of dependence, when one country is lacking or must give up a certain capability and supposes that the other partner will provide this (e.g. in case of Baltic Air Policing).

This assessment is useful to point out that compared to other, more developed and complex functional examples of regional defence cooperation, the V4 have engaged in defence cooperation only through the pooling and sharing of capabilities. This ensures that the command of their cooperating armed forces remains under national control, and

²⁷ CSIKI-NÉMETH 2012: 3–5.

they only need to accept slight limitations on their sovereign decision-making and they only need to undertake weak dependence on their partners. Other European examples of defence cooperation, such as NORDEFECO or various formats in Western Europe with Benelux or German participation, show that going along the way of truly integrating some parts or functions of their armed forces would require way more concessions from them. In order to show what exact functions and cooperative elements are missing, namely where the gaps are and if the promise of integration actually corresponds to the political proclamations in the case of the V4, the second part of the analysis will show where the V4 fall short of deep, elaborate defence cooperation.

In this second step, a qualitative case study analysis of the 14 enabling conditions of successful defence cooperation, identified by Valásek²⁸ and Zandee et al.²⁹ will be undertaken to estimate the realisation prospects of the V4's future plans. To ensure a clear focus, these will be aligned in 3 groups (strategic, political, technical enablers). The converging or diverging characteristics regarding these enablers – or preconditions – will show the obstacles due to which the current level of cooperation has not been surpassed. Also, these obstacles, or shortcomings identify those areas in which national governments can boost their efforts to overcome these if they truly want to create deeper and more capable defence cooperation, as envisaged by their long-term defence plans.

When conducting this comparison, in some respects we can rely on empirical research results (such as measuring public opinion or elite attitudes, surveying the potential of defence corruption) or hard data (some characteristics of the armed forces or production potential of national defence industries). In other cases, we can use national strategic documents and joint declarations, as well as long-term plans for the modernisation of the armed forces. While in a number of cases such assessment can be done through evaluating the ongoing political discourse and debate at national, regional and also at European levels.³⁰ At the same time, some aspects are more challenging to uncover, like the technical working-level progress of cooperative programs, as the sharing of information by the defence establishments of the V4 is limited.

Upon concluding the assessment of the 14 enabling conditions, here, aligned in three functional groups to ensure a clear understanding, I will identify those areas which, compared to other European models, are functional – versus those that lack the necessary depth, content and attention on behalf of decision-makers. Those that are functional serve as the basis of the evolving cooperation formats, while those that are underdeveloped contribute to the incomplete nature of the V4 defence cooperation format.

²⁸ VALÁSEK 2011: 21–26.

²⁹ ZANDEE et al. 2016: 4–6.

³⁰ Observing the wider discourse is relevant because in recent years the sub-regional defence cooperation of the V4, that had been established to complement NATO and EU capability development, became embedded in the wider political debate about the reform and future of the European Union, with the V4 often appearing as a political pole standing up against EU institutions. These debates, in the mid- to long-term, will definitely affect the ability and willingness of the V4 to formulate their joint cooperative endeavours, predetermining the “seriousness of intent” to work together in such sensitive fields as defence that would require a significant degree of sovereignty-sharing.

What have the V4 achieved in the field of defence cooperation and what lies ahead?

The first move of the V4 to include security and defence-related issues in their cooperation was the adoption of their Kromeríz Declaration in 2004.³¹ Throughout the following years the V4 Prime Ministers in a general sense supported the elaboration of EU CSDP as well as the European Neighbourhood Policy, further enlargement plans for both the European Union and NATO and subscribed to the evolving security and defence policy of both organisations. Their Bratislava Declaration of 2011, issued on the 20th anniversary of their cooperation, reinforced their endeavour to cooperate and possibly even further align their positions within both NATO and the EU, highlighting competitiveness, energy security and infrastructure development as current issues of mutual interest and importance on the European agenda.³² In the same year, they also identified the establishment of a V4 EU Battlegroup (BG) as a shared aim at their defence ministerial meeting in Levoča (Slovakia), later on officially declared and agreed upon in Warsaw in 2013, elevating the V4 cooperation to a new level.³³

Between 2012 and 2014 the V4 have deepened their defence cooperation step by step. In their joint declaration issued on the occasion of the NATO Chicago Summit, they signalled their intent to engage in joint capability development in the fields of air controller training (FAC/JTAC), Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear defence (CBRN), helicopter pilot training (MATC), joint logistics, medical treatment facilities, multinational experimentation, pooling maritime patrol aircraft, and training in Counter Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IED). In the coming months the Litoměřice Declaration (2012), the Warsaw Declaration (2013) and the Bratislava Declaration (2013) repeatedly reinforced these aims. The more frequent political messages can also be attributed to the recognition that the V4 must strengthen the visibility of the “V4 brand” to gain better leverage of their cooperation within the EU and more acknowledgement within NATO. (From the autumn of 2014, when the crisis in Ukraine began and since the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has been going on, issuing such declarations on defence efforts has become more challenging as these could not leave out the V4 joint position on Russia, regarding which the four countries take somewhat different positions.)

The October 2013 Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Heads of Government on Strengthening the V4 Security and Defence Cooperation (Budapest) paved the way for adopting the Long-term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening their Defence Cooperation in March 2014. The Long-term Vision defined the foundations for their defence cooperation up until 2032, identifying the conceptual elements of capability development, the joint mechanisms of defence planning, the harmonisation

³¹ Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on Cooperation of the Visegrad Group Countries after their Accession to the European Union. Kromeríz, 12 May 2004.

³² Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Visegrad Group. Bratislava, 15 February 2011.

³³ WEISS 2012; VALÁSEK 2012; LORENZ 2013; PAULECH–URBANOVSKÁ 2014.

of multinational exercises and the aim of defence industrial cooperation. According to the Vision, both a high-level V4 Planning Group and practical Working Teams would be created to support the realisation of these aims. Furthermore, the Long-term Vision identified eight broad areas in which strategic cooperation is to be developed: 1. V4 EU Battlegroup; 2. cooperation in defence planning; 3. joint training and exercises; 4. joint procurement and defence industrial cooperation; 5. military education; 6. joint air control; 7. harmonising and promoting V4 joint positions; 8. communication strategy for the V4.³⁴

In March 2015 five projects had been shortlisted as targets for short- to mid-term cooperation in the Joint Communiqué of the defence ministers: 1. training and exercises; 2. the creation of a Joint Logistics Support Group; 3. Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear defence; 4. training Joint Terminal Attack Controllers; 5. Special Operations Forces' Tactical Training. It is worth to note that this package was not over-ambitious at all as Central European countries (the V4 plus Austria, Croatia and Slovenia in various parallel formats) had been working on most of these for years by then. Besides, developing an Advanced Ground Combat Vehicle was also identified as “an area with a high potential for intensive cooperation among V4 countries and is thus worth further discussion”,³⁵ and the feasibility of conducting joint V4 airspace protection was set to be examined. Furthermore, according to the tasks set, the V4 Training and Exercise Strategy, including the 2016–2020 Midterm Plan of Training Opportunities was drafted and the work on creating the Visegrad Group Military Educational Platform (VIGMILEP) began. Last, but not least, the Action Plan of the Visegrad Group Defence Cooperation for the period July 2016 – June 2018 was adopted by the Slovak V4 presidency.³⁶

However, practical deliverables regarding these elements have only been partial and the development – especially deepening – of the cooperation along these priorities has been losing momentum. Since the creation (2015) and activation of the ca. 3,700 troops strong V4 EU BG (2016) the defence cooperation of the Visegrád countries has blended into NATO's Readiness Action Plan and adaptation measures, such as strengthening the Enhanced Forward Presence. This is practically in line with the 2015 consensus that “all options related to the establishment of the Permanent V4 Modular Force operational for NATO and EU Rapid Reaction Forces as well as for crisis management tasks” should be discovered and evaluated. As a pragmatic measure, the recurrence of the EU BG in a mainly unchanged force structure and capability profile, but including Croatian troop contributions as well, in the second half of 2019 took place.

It is worth to note that the momentum of defence cooperation has weakened after 2015–2016, since when the European refugee crisis overtook the political agenda and the V4, and their Central European partners began to (temporarily?) shift the focus of cooperation towards border control and the management of mass migration.³⁷ This shift was driven not only by security needs (as the Balkans wave of mass migration halted by the end of 2015 and both the European Union, its member states and third countries

³⁴ Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening their Defence Cooperation. Visegrad, 14 March 2014.

³⁵ Joint Communiqué of the Visegrad Group Ministers of Defence. Tomášov, 23 April 2015.

³⁶ Report of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group, July 2014 – June 2015.

³⁷ NÉMETH 2018.

adopted preventive measures), but also by the political aim to keep the anti-immigration V4 position visible within the European Union by tying it to the “V4 brand” in every possible aspect. Defence cooperation, on the contrary, seems to have lost its priority position.

As we have seen, a multitude of high-level political declarations and strategic planning documents have been adopted by the V4, and these could/can serve as the foundation of deeper defence cooperation with practical deliverables. As Table 1 shows, we can evaluate these achievements and plans against the scale of pooling and sharing formations to get a picture of the current and possible intensity of the cooperation in terms of sharing sovereignty, command and control, etc., resulting in increasing degrees of political, financial and functional dependence. The current form of the V4 defence cooperation – primarily because of the recurring V4 Battlegroup – fits into the second category, the pooling of capabilities, which takes place “when national capabilities are integrated into an international force structure, while the command and control of these forces is still retained by national authorities. In this case it is the integrated and coordinated force planning process that decreases the costs of personnel and logistics”.³⁸

Table 1: The intensity of realised and planned defence cooperation of the V4 in terms of pooling and sharing

	Characteristics of cooperation	Example	Current V4 cooperation	Future V4 cooperation
Role and task sharing	When a state needs to give up a certain capability and another country makes this capability available in case of need.	Belgian and Dutch navies: Belgium provides logistics and maintenance of minesweepers for both countries, while the Netherlands provides the same for both navies’ frigates.	–	<i>Developing niche capabilities or providing for certain air policing and air defense functions.</i>
Pooling through acquisition	Joint acquisition: countries join to purchase, maintain and operate a capability. Very cost-effective, but significantly reduces sovereign national control over the assets. Co-development: countries begin to jointly develop and produce an asset that they individually could not afford	NATI Airbone Warning and Control System (AWACS), Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jets, A400M military transport aircraft, Eurocopter helicopters	–	<i>V4 Advanced Ground Combat Vehicle</i>
Pooling of capabilities	National capabilities integrated into an international force structure, force planning process coordinated. Command and control still retained by national authorities, operation costs fall upon countries in proportion of participation.	Multinational corps: EU Battlegroups, NATO Response Force, Eurocorps.	Recurring V4 EU Battlegroup (2016, 2019)	Permanent V4 EU Battlegroup / NATO Response Force rotations



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³⁸ CSIKI–NÉMETH 2012: 3.

Sharing of capabilities	Based on national capabilities, force structures are not integrated into a single international force structure. Command and control are retained by national armed force, operational costs fall upon countries in proportion of their participation. National governments retain their sovereign control.	Coordination of multinational education, training and maintenance activities, the drafting of joint doctrines, the enhancement of interoperability and the exchange of information.	V4 joint trainings	Extending V4 joint trainings, creating joint military education, establish shared maintenance programs.
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Note: Shaded areas represent future – still unrealised – cooperation possibilities, italics highlight cooperation formats that would be more intense than the current programs.

Source: Compiled by the author.

The long-term strategic goals that had been defined prior to 2016 also include deeper cooperation and integration formats, such as joint acquisition and pooling through acquisition (examining any potential cases when two or more states can procure and operate any assets together), co-development (of the V4 Advanced Ground Combat Vehicle), as well as role and task sharing (developing niche capabilities or providing for certain air policing and air defence functions). We are still to see whether the V4 would go down the road to undertake such steps. To get a better understanding of the chances of realisation, the earlier mentioned enabling conditions of defence cooperation are assessed in the following part.

The enabling conditions of (and obstacles to) deeper V4 defence cooperation

Beyond the theoretical categorisation we also possess practical measures to assess how long the V4 have gone down the road of defence cooperation: the lessons learnt from existing formats of sub-regional defence cooperation are summarised by Valásek and Zandee et al. These 14 enabling conditions are aligned in 3 groups in the following part: strategic, political and technical enablers are assessed for members of the V4 group. The importance of such assessment is that these enabling conditions serve as the connection between short-term practical activities and the long-term strategic goals. These pillars – as shown in Figure 1 – underpin the realisation prospects of the long-term goals for the next 15 years. The weakness, or lack of synergy in these fields will make the deepening of defence collaboration less likely, limiting the prospects of V4 cooperation. The assessment that follows will build upon the research previously done by Csiki.³⁹

³⁹ CSIKI 2017.

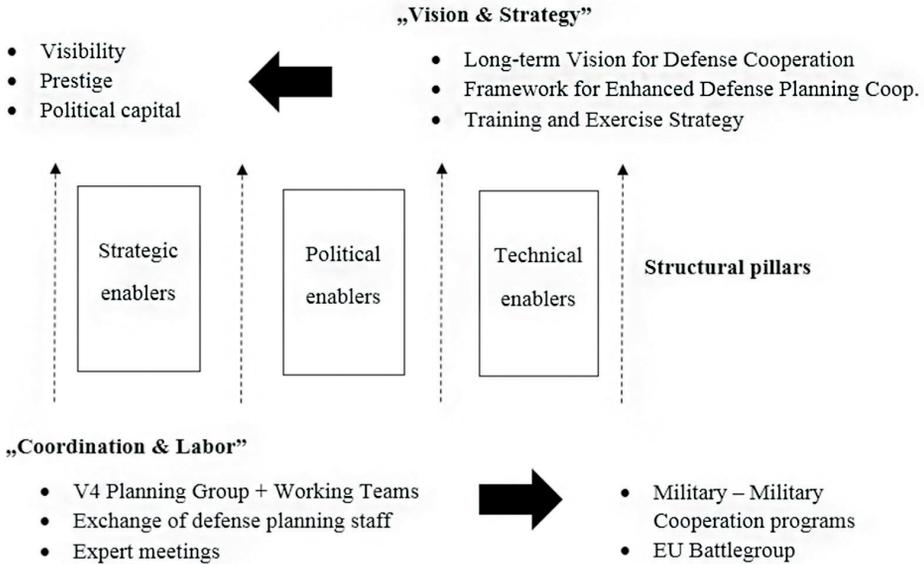


Figure 1: The structural pillars (14 enabling preconditions organised into strategic, political and technical enablers) that connect the current cooperation activities to long-term strategic goals and should underpin them

Source: Compiled by the author.

Strategic enablers

Strategic enablers are geographical and historical background, the number of partners involved and the similarity of strategic cultures of the participating countries. Assessing the geographical position (geopolitics) and historical background is important to identify the determining external relations, such as alliances and conflicts, the relation to great powers and the use of military force, based on historical experience. Even though in case of the Visegrád countries the general approach is that ‘Central European’ countries share their historical past, we can observe certain differences that influence their ability to foster defence cooperation. The most important of these is the relation to Russia. Poland, on the one hand, is primarily exposed to effects from Eastern Europe, its geopolitical focus is primarily set on the region and the historical background predetermines the vivid threat-awareness from Russia, due to which Warsaw is much preoccupied with territorial defence and ensuring direct defence guarantees from NATO and bilaterally from the U.S.⁴⁰ Even though the other three countries share the historical experience of being members of the Eastern Block during the Cold War, the Czech Republic and Hungary in spite of the experience of Soviet interventions to suppress democratic revolutions, they are not so much anti-Russian in their perceptions and policies these years. Hungary, on

⁴⁰ KNEZOVIC 2015.

the other hand, is primarily exposed to effects from the Balkans, its geopolitical focus is primarily the Southern neighbourhood.⁴¹ Also, because the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia are small states with a narrow geopolitical focus, and the middle power Poland is more concerned with territorial defence than crisis management in other regions,⁴² it is more likely that these countries would be willing to create joint structures with a Central European territorial defence purpose for the longer term, not so much “expeditionary forces” for crisis management – unless major allies, such as the U.S. would trigger them to participate in such operations, as we had witnessed in case of Iraq and Afghanistan. Great power intervention both from the East and the West, in any case, is a determining historical factor across the region.⁴³ Another factor that should be kept in mind is the historical background of the V4 themselves, in which regard the 20th century track-record signs the potential of friction between Hungary and Slovakia about national minorities. There seems to be a 2 + 2 formation in place among them, with Hungary and Poland having an idealised, historically supportive relation towards each other, and Slovakia and the Czech Republic sharing a better understanding based on their shared state until 1993.

The limited number of partners, namely the non-institutionalised minilateral cooperation of the four countries should offer room for discussion both in terms of political and technical aspects. Still in this regard, the more substantial capabilities of Poland that would enable Warsaw to step up as the “lead nation of the V4”, should be subject for discussion, whether this would be desirable, necessary or avoidable.

The elements of strategic culture⁴⁴ of the V4 show important discrepancies in various regards. We can see somewhat varying positions with regards to the prioritised role of NATO and Atlanticism in general, which is strongest by far for Poland, accompanied by strong U.S. bilateral relations and underpinned by operational commitment.⁴⁵ The U.S. is identified as a bilateral strategic partner for Slovakia as well. NATO is defined as the cornerstone of Hungary’s security,⁴⁶ and is prioritised in security and defence for Slovakia as well.⁴⁷ Czech defence policy grants formally equal role for both NATO and the EU, while operational commitment and capability development is strongly tied to NATO. The support provided for EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) programs, such as PESCO is the strongest for Slovakia (even leading one project, the Indirect Fire Support Capability – “EuroArtillery”). For Hungary, the participation in the CSDP is granted but the general sovereignty protection and opposition to further deepening of the European integration contradicts meaningful commitment to EU programs, such as PESCO.⁴⁸ Similarly, the strong tradition of Euroscepticism questions the meaningful commitment to structured EU defence cooperation in the Czech Republic,⁴⁹ while in

⁴¹ TÁLAS–CSIKI 2013: 171.

⁴² TERLIKOWSKI 2013: 273.

⁴³ SIRÉN 2009: 211.

⁴⁴ On the concept and operationalisation of strategic culture see BIEHL et al. 2013: 13–16.

⁴⁵ TERLIKOWSKI 2013: 269–273.

⁴⁶ Government Resolution 1035/2012 (21.II.) on Hungary’s National Security Strategy: 11.

⁴⁷ White Paper on Defence of the Slovak Republic. Bratislava, 2016: 42.

⁴⁸ CSIKI 2017: 148–149.

⁴⁹ JIREŠ 2013: 71.

Poland EU CSDP has gained in importance in the past couple of years but the primacy of NATO is unquestionable.⁵⁰ For the Czech Republic and Hungary, the strengthening of ties with Germany is also observable.

International ambitions are limited in all four cases, while for Poland the primary focus of foreign policy is the Post-Soviet region and Eastern Europe,⁵¹ for Slovakia Eastern Europe and the Balkans,⁵² for Hungary Central Europe and the Balkans⁵³ and for the Czech Republic the wider Euro-Atlantic region.⁵⁴ This has a determining impact on threat perceptions, as well as on the political will to participate in any military or defence-related activities (be it collective defence, stabilisation or crisis management) in the East or in the South. These not fully overlapping foci of interest foreshadow conflicting positions about where, for what purpose, under what kind of mandate and in what format should and could joint forces be deployed in any future operation.

The lessons learnt on the use of military force from the past two decades' international engagements show that the four countries have similar aims and means, taking mostly combat support and support roles, primarily relying on their land forces and to some extent on special operations forces (SOF) – with the exception of Poland, willing to undertake combat roles and higher levels of engagement if allied requests (particularly on behalf of the U.S.) justify it.⁵⁵ The decision-making process regarding defence issues is somewhat aligned as the necessity to be able to participate in NATO and EU (rapid reaction) collective defence operations required all allies to introduce swift, government-centred decision-making schemes. However, necessary *post factum* approval of national parliaments or the President in the case of Poland might make maintaining such engagement more challenging.⁵⁶

Political enablers

Political enablers are respective countries' relation to sharing their sovereignty or retaining their autonomy, trust and solidarity towards each other, realism, the clarity and seriousness of intentions, the involvement of parliaments and low corruption in the defence sphere.

The political willingness of the V4 to form structured, strategic cooperation with each other is much predetermined by their general stance towards sharing sovereignty versus retaining autonomy. This issue lies at the heart of many political debates across the European Union – and the Visegrád countries in general stand for the strengthening of nation states' sovereignty. Hungary and Poland particularly aim at ensuring the strong

⁵⁰ TERLIKOWSKI 2013: 273–274.

⁵¹ TERLIKOWSKI 2013: 272.

⁵² NICOLINI et al. 2013: 307–309.

⁵³ Government Resolution 1035/2012 (21.II.) on Hungary's National Security Strategy: 12.

⁵⁴ Security Strategy of the Czech Republic. Prague, 2015: 8.

⁵⁵ White Book on the National Security of the Republic of Poland. Warsaw, 2013: 12; National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland. Warsaw, 2014: 20–21.

⁵⁶ TERLIKOWSKI 2013: 269.

protection of national sovereignty,⁵⁷ which goes directly against the sharing of responsibility for political and military decisions, command and control, and increasing mutual dependence. The stance of Slovakia in this regard is more moderate due to its Eurozone membership.⁵⁸ This contradictory situation has not been addressed by the V4 so far.

We can get an idea of trust and solidarity among the V4 based on public opinion polls extending to all four countries. This should be further elaborated by focused opinion polls carried out among decision-makers, policy influencers, and members of the military as well to get a clearer picture. What we see now is an unbalanced picture: the majority of respondents would stand behind allied nations in case of an attack, with very strong support in Poland (90%), strong support in the Czech Republic (70%) and Hungary (68%) and majority support in Slovakia (54%).⁵⁹ Regarding trust, the 2 + 2 formation is observable again: the Czech and the Slovak, as well as the Poles and the Hungarians show rather strong mutual trust towards each other. For Czech respondents, trust towards Slovaks (79%) is strongest, followed by Poles (58%) and Hungarians (37%). For Hungarian respondents, trust towards Poles (58%) is strongest, followed by Slovaks (40%) and the Czech (40%). Trust for Polish respondents is rather equally strong towards Slovaks (69%), Czechs (61%) and Hungarians (61%). Slovak respondents trust the Czech most (78%), followed by the Poles (44%) and the Hungarians (30%) with considerably lower levels of trust.⁶⁰

As for estimating the clarity and seriousness of intentions, one must note that even though general plans for strategic cooperation until 2032 had been drafted in the Long-term Vision in 2014, addressing three areas – 1. capability development, joint procurement and defence industrial cooperation; 2. creation of multinational units (a regional, modular force that is regularly offered to NATO and the EU); 3. improving common training, education and exercises – the possible divisions are not addressed even at the strategic level. Among those noted here and further below, the different geopolitical foci, the distinct relations to great powers, especially to Russia, the lack of a shared vision for the deployment/operational use for the EU Battlegroup or any subsequent recurring or permanent format seem to be the most decisive challenges. Looking forward, the significant differences in qualitative enablers, such as parliamentary involvement and popular support, the low-level involvement of the military, limited ambitions to work on a V4 defence identity and culture; as well as gaps in practical enablers, such as high-level information sharing, better aligned defence planning, cooperative defence industry projects are also clearly visible. Avoiding the discussion of these basic issues also questions somewhat the seriousness of intent for the long-term strategic cooperation at the highest political and military levels. As an additional factor, the popular support for the V4 cooperation

⁵⁷ Workshop discussion with Polish foreign policy expert in Budapest on 8 December 2016.

⁵⁸ Workshop discussion with Slovak foreign policy expert in Budapest on 8 December 2016.

⁵⁹ Answering the question: “Would you help defend your NATO allies in case of an attack?” MILO et al. 2017:17.

⁶⁰ Answering the question: “To what extent can we trust and rely on the following nations?” Responses for “definitely trust + rather trust” and “rather distrust + definitely distrust” are merged; the opinion about 12 nations (Americans, Austrians, British, Croats, French, Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Russians, Slovaks, Slovenians and Ukrainians) had been surveyed. GYÁRFÁŠOVÁ–MESEŽNIKOV 2016: 20–21.

(in general) can be measured by public opinion polls: moderate support was witnessed in the Czech Republic (46%) and in Hungary (52%), with rather strong support in Poland (62%) and in Slovakia (75%).⁶¹

The parliamentary dimension of multinational cooperation could provide wider political support for joint endeavours not only among decision-makers, but also involving constituencies. However, MPs have not been involved in the development of the cooperation so far, it is primarily driven by prime ministers, ministers of defence/foreign affairs and Chiefs of Defence, Political Directors.⁶² This leaves much room for deepening the embeddedness of the cooperation.

Another politically driven enabling factor would be the (expected) low level of corruption in the defence sphere. This can be examined based upon Transparency International's Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index that currently appears to be the best available tool, relying on a solid methodological background.⁶³ Even though Slovakia was not included in the last iteration of the index scores (2015), the Czech Republic and Hungary did show moderate risk of corruption in average with high risk in activities related to Procurement (both countries) and Operations (Czech Republic). Poland in general showed low risk of defence corruption, with high risk regarding Operations. As these two areas are likely to be the focal points of any future cooperation, much attention needs to be dedicated to counter this challenge, especially in the years to come, when the initiated defence modernisation programs will be executed.

Technical enablers

Technical enablers include the similar sizes and specificities of the cooperating countries' armed forces, comparable national defence industries, defence planning alignment, standardisation and interoperability among national armed forces, supported by similar mindset, defence culture and organisational culture, as well as simultaneous top-down political and military leadership and bottom-up engagement.

The comparison of the size and specificities of the armed forces show the clear distinction of the Polish Armed Forces, suitable for a European middle power in terms of personnel, equipment and defence budget, with a clear territorial defence profile.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the other three countries started to modernise their relatively smaller armed forces later and with more limited resources. In this regard, Poland bears the potential to become a lead nation in any Central European multinational format, providing the

⁶¹ GYÁRFÁŠOVÁ 2013: 103.

⁶² Panel discussion with Czech, Polish and Slovak security policy experts in Budapest on 21 September 2018.

⁶³ Transparency International 2015.

⁶⁴ The Czech Republic: 21,750 active + 3,650 other military personnel; organised in 2 services (Army, Air Force); territorial reserve forces being set up; defence expenditure in 2020: 3,252 Bn USD. Hungary: 27,800 active + 20,000 reserve military personnel; 3 services (Army, Air Force, Logistics) organised into a joint force; territorial reserve forces to be set up; defence expenditure in 2020: 2,410 Bn USD. Poland: 123,700 active + 73,400 paramilitary military personnel; organised into 4 services (Land Forces, Air Force, Navy, Special Forces); territorial reserve forces being set up; defence expenditure in 2020: 13,027 Bn USD. Slovakia: 15,850 active military personnel; organised into 4 services (Central Staff, Army, Air Force, Support and Training); defence expenditure in 2020: 1,837 Bn USD. IISS 2020; SIPRI 2020.

operational headquarters, command and control and staff elements, if the others are willing to “plug in” their units.⁶⁵

In terms of the defence industrial potential the situation is even more unbalanced.⁶⁶ Poland has regionally meaningful production capabilities with more advanced technology and tie-in to international production lines. The Czech and Slovak defence industries rather represent niche fields, while Hungary has very limited capacities in this field.⁶⁷ Meaningful cooperation based on this industrial background is more likely for the land forces’ equipment and regarding logistics or defence services. The proposed idea to co-develop and jointly procure an Advanced Ground Combat Vehicle type for the V4 thus might be a suitable target but would require careful planning for long-term production prospects (determining specifications, rational research and development schedule, economical production, export options).⁶⁸

The ambition of creating a V4 Planning Group to align defence planning and procurement programs was articulated in 2014, working groups for coordination exist, though no proof of meaningful results in this field has been publicly disclosed. The major acquisition programs by Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in the past decade had been realised without coordination as for types of equipment.⁶⁹ Thus, the mutual and complementing knowledge of each other’s planning goals beyond the NATO Defence Planning Process is not ensured. Hungary has particularly not shared any concrete plans of its “Zrínyi – 2026” long-term modernisation plan beyond vague goals, and any information-sharing on procurement decisions has been *post factum* so far.

The strengthening of interoperability is primarily driven by NATO, though the highest level including all V4 countries is achieved within the EU BG. Standardisation is only occasional for some weapon systems (e.g. Gripen multipurpose jets both in the Czech and Hungarian Air Forces) and it is not incorporating all four countries’ armed forces. On similar grounds, there is a shared minimum of NATO and EU compatibility regarding the mindset, defence culture and organisation of the four countries aiming at defence cooperation, while the V4 EU Battlegroup serves mutual enculturation and the creation of a V4 organisational culture.

⁶⁵ IISS 2018: 94, 114–115, 135, 145.

⁶⁶ The Polish defence industry, made up of 200 security and defence companies altogether (some Tier 2 and one Tier 1 company), possesses production capabilities in several fields including advanced weapons systems, and is capable to produce for export as well, seeking further European and U.S. defence industry cooperation in producing major weapons systems. Czech defence industry has production capabilities in the fields of aircraft industry, firearms, CBRN and logistics, about 100 defence companies altogether, including some Tier 2 companies as well, making them able to produce for export (SZENES 2017: 7). Slovakia has much smaller defence industry and R&D capacities with about 35 security and defence companies altogether (no Tier 1 and 2 company), which are able to provide services for the land forces, mostly regarding vehicles, communication systems and ammunitions (Security and Defence Industry Association of the Slovak Republic s. a.). The Hungarian defence industry is almost non-existent (about 30 security and defence companies altogether, no Tier 1 and 2 companies, no export) with limited service capabilities, and lacking any meaningful R&D (CSIKI 2014: 131). This situation is only expected to change as a result of the ‘Zrínyi’ long-term armed forces development program.

⁶⁷ Security and Defence Industry Association of the Slovak Republic 2016; SZENES 2017: 7; CSIKI 2014: 131.

⁶⁸ Panel discussion with Czech, Polish and Slovak security policy experts in Budapest on 21 September 2018.

⁶⁹ Panel discussion with Czech, Polish and Slovak security policy experts in Budapest on 21 September 2018.

Last, but not least, the top-down political and military leadership and bottom-up engagement have not been systematically studied in any participating country so far, we can only make estimations of centralised top-level participation and hardly any bottom-up engagement based on consultations with members of national defence forces.

Summarising the qualitative analysis of these enabling conditions, we can conclude that much remains to be done among the Visegrád countries if their ambitious strategic plans regarding defence cooperation were to be realised. The long-term strategic plans that had been outlined in 2014 would require significant harmonisation and deepening especially in the fields of joint capability planning, information sharing, decision-making, also involving members of both the political and military, as well as MPs. Furthermore, broadening the strategic discourse to include currently unaddressed issues, such as the different geopolitical foci, relations to great powers, especially to Russia, the lack of a shared vision for the operational use for any joint military formation is necessary to ensure meaningful cooperation in the future.

Conclusions

The cooperation of the Visegrád countries, active since 1991, created a definite defence policy dimension from January 2011, reaching its (currently) most complex form via establishing an EU Battlegroup, thus becoming more and more ambitious throughout the years and drawing up long-term strategic plans for deepening this cooperation up until 2032. Despite the fact that scholarly attention dedicated to multinational defence cooperation in Europe has been dealing with various cases, manifold reasons and enabling conditions that make such cooperative endeavours more successful had been identified, the long-term strategic prospects, the “depth” of the V4 defence cooperation is scarcely analysed. Without such analyses, it is hard to judge, whether the cooperation of the V4 in the field of defence bears the prospects of elaborated, truly aligned and meaningful, mutually strengthening relations, having a solid value and interest-based fundament, or more driven forward by spectacular but empty or half-hearted political declarations and limited military pragmatism. Not only from academic and analytical points of view, but also for its policy relevance, understanding the coherence (or divergence) of enabling conditions for such strategic cooperation is important, though not much covered so far.

This paper was aimed at assessing the long-term strategic prospects of the sub-regional defence cooperation of the Visegrád countries based on lessons learnt of the period 1999–2019. The analysis was based on two pillars. First, the evolution and content of the cooperation was mapped up to scale its intensity. This has shown that the current cooperative formats qualify as amounting to the (1) sharing of capabilities and the (2) pooling of capabilities as a maximum, within the four theoretical categories of capability pooling and sharing. Harmonised training and joint exercises embody the sharing of capabilities, while the most intense current form of the V4 defence cooperation – primarily because of their recurring EU Battlegroup – fits into the second category. This implies that there is further room for intensifying their defence cooperation to (3) forms of pooling through

acquisition, as well as (4) role and task sharing. This assessment is useful to point out that the V4 have engaged in defence cooperation only through the first two categories that still ensure that the command of their cooperating armed forces remains under national control. Thus, they only need to accept slight limitations on their sovereign decision-making and they only need to undertake weak dependence on their partners. Going along the way of truly integrating some parts or functions of their armed forces would require way more concessions from them.

The second part of the paper has shown the obstacles why this has not happened yet and why it might be challenging in the years to come as well. In the light of lessons learnt from proliferating formats of multinational defence cooperation in Europe, the qualitative case study analysis of the 14 enabling conditions of successful defence cooperation identified by Valásek⁷⁰ and Zandee et al.,⁷¹ was used to estimate the realisation prospects of the V4's plans for the future. Here, these preconditions had been aligned in 3 groups (strategic, political, technical enablers) to ensure a clear focus and understanding of the role these aspects (should) play. The diverging characteristics of these enablers highlight the obstacles due to which the current level of cooperation has not been surpassed. At the same time, these shortcomings identify areas in which national governments can boost their cooperative efforts if they truly want to create deeper and more capable defence cooperation, as envisaged by their long-term defence plans.

In sum, the paper was aimed at providing original contribution in terms of qualitative assessment and highlight those factors that still lack in-depth research. Among others, a concise picture of the V4's strategic culture was provided, as well as a sample of public opinion polls available on trust and solidarity towards each other. It is important to point out that scholars need to engage in further analysis regarding several technical aspects of the cooperation, such as the specificities of armed forces, production capabilities of national defence industries, or the risks of defence corruption. Further exploratory studies on the four countries' national defence establishments and militaries are definitely needed, comparing the respective countries, including top-down political and military leadership and bottom-up engagement, the alignment of defence culture and organisation, as well as of defence planning, the interoperability of the armed forces and the involvement of national parliaments in developing multinational defence cooperation.

The qualitative assessment has shown that substantially better harmonisation and the intensification of cooperation would be required especially in the fields of joint capability planning, information sharing, decision-making, also involving members of both the political and military establishment, as well as MPs. Furthermore, broadening the strategic discourse to include currently unaddressed issues, such as the different geopolitical foci, relations to great powers, especially to Russia, the lack of a shared vision for the operational use for any joint military formation is necessary to ensure meaningful cooperation in the future. Such developments would require more sovereignty-sharing and move the cooperation beyond the pooling of capabilities towards deeper formats, as

⁷⁰ VALÁSEK 2011: 21–26.

⁷¹ ZANDEE et al. 2016: 4–6.

outlined in long-term goals, also increasing joint action potential. The sustained weakness, or lack of synergy in these fields will make the deepening of defence collaboration less likely, limiting the prospects of V4 cooperation.

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