



Defence cooperation: Mission (Im)Possible?

As part of the programme of the Visegrad Youth Forum 2017, the event's participants had the chance to discuss and deepen their knowledge of the topic of defence cooperation on NATO's eastern flank with professionals, who are part of the decision-making process on the said issue in V4 countries. Speaking at the panel discussion titled "*Defence cooperation: Mission (Im)Possible?*" were **Ferenc Kalmár**, *Deputy Head of the Defence Policy Unit at the Ministry of Defence of Hungary*, **Miroslav Mizera**, *Special Advisor to the Deputy Minister of Defence at the Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic* and **Jakub Kufčák**, research fellow at the *AMO Research Center* in the Czech Republic. The discussion was chaired by **Martin Mancoš**, *Vice President of the Euro-Atlantic Center*.

Following the introductory remarks by **Jaroslav Ušiak**, *Vice Dean for International and Public Relations at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of the Matej Bel University*, Ferenc Kalmár took the floor as the discussion's first speaker. According to him, the V4 has a long history of defence cooperation, but it is absolutely mission impossible to understand the origin of this cooperation. "*One should look at various documents, declarations and joint statements adopted by the Visegrad group, because these all determine our cooperation in the field of defence,*" said Mr. Kalmár. He continued by highlighting one of the most important strategic documents – the Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening their Defence Cooperation. In this document, V4 member countries agreed on a common vision to secure capabilities of development, procurement and defence industry, the establishment of multinational units and cross border activities, and last but not least, education, training and military exercises. Moreover, V4 countries coordinated their respective views on defence and security.

Mr. Kalmár stressed that defence cooperation is very much active nowadays. "*The last official statement from February 2017 sets out that defence cooperation is a really important issue. Furthermore, under each presidency, experts and officials from Visegrad countries are meeting twice a year to discuss pressing issues in the areas of defence and security.*" According to Mr. Kalmár, the most tangible result of defence cooperation are the contributions of V4 countries to NATO's rotational deployment of military units in the Baltics. "*The V4 European Union Battlegroup*

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is the flagship project of the V4 and also the most visible project,” he added. It is going to be on operational standby again in the second half of 2019. Mr. Kalmár also pointed out that education and training are integral parts of cooperation. *“Our countries are training closely together during various exercises not only on the regional (Visegrad) level, but on the global (NATO) level as well.”* Mr. Kalmár wrapped up his contribution to the discussion by expressing that the change in the security environment in Europe is ironically giving us more incentives to work closely together in the field of defence and to increase our defence budgets.

Speaking next, Miroslav Mizera joined Mr. Kalmár in evaluating the change in global security following the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent events in eastern Ukraine. According to him, we currently face new challenges, for instance hybrid threats, cyber-attacks, as well as disinformation and propaganda. Poland, along with the Baltic states, is the prime supporter of NATO’s presence on its eastern flank, thus leading the conversation on security and defence issues in the V4. At the Warsaw summit, NATO responded to the “slowly-awakening Russian bear” in various ways. First, they established centres of excellence, which are designed to tackle the threat of hybrid warfare. Second of all, the Alliance created the NATO Force Integration Unit. *“They are international teams that provide support for NATO troops and ensure the fastest and most immediate deployment of the NATO Response Force,”* described Mr. Mizera.

Mr. Mizera further elaborated on the enhanced presence of NATO troops in the Baltics. *“The most visible step was to strengthen the number of troops in the volatile regions of the Alliance’s eastern flank. This was done purely on a voluntary basis. The said numbers don’t exceed a few hundred, which means that they are not expected to attack anybody, but to rather protect allies in the Baltics. We have seen paramilitary groups in Crimea take over an entire region by force, which is why NATO sent troops to the Baltics. Certainly, the numbers are small, but the presence of NATO troops has a more symbolic aspect – if you shoot one of the NATO soldiers, it will be an attack on the Alliance as a whole.”* According to Mr. Mizera, following the conflict in Ukraine, NATO is going back to its roots – territorial defence.

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Taking the floor last, Mr. Kufčák agreed with Mr. Kalmár on defence cooperation among V4 countries having a long history. *“Since the very beginning of the V4, we are trying to help each other in the areas of defence and security. One of the purposes during the early days of the V4 was the departure of Russian forces that remained in Central Europe following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.”* He pointed out that the V4 is now experiencing a kind of restart in the aforementioned areas. According to him, cooperation widened and deepened – from a chaotic agenda in the past, we have moved to structural cooperation. *“Now, we have joint declarations and statements that are adopted regularly and structurally.”* Mr. Kufčák also added that rising defence budgets lowered incentives for cooperation, because countries can afford more, and they do not have to rely on the help of others. Moreover, he warned that we must further deepen our cooperation and create long-lasting projects not based on political decisions that can change after elections in one of the four member countries, but rather on strategic and structural decisions that ensure the ability to take the lead in defending NATO’s eastern flank and take care of one of the battalions in the Baltics. The reason is that following 2020, support from western allies for states on the eastern frontier may fade away, as there might not be enough incentives for them to protect its eastern allies.

“Another crucial element of defence cooperation is education. We must organize joint education our forces in order to give them the same training background and informational foundation. We have to cut down on our differences, bring our soldiers together and bind them with common knowledge and abilities.” Mr. Kufčák then proceeded to criticize the lack of a procurement project, as western countries had projects to unite their capabilities for almost 50 years. *“In time, our armies get smaller due to the rising prices of military equipment and if we fail to create joint capabilities, our armies will be useless in modern warfare,”* added Mr. Kufčák, while also stressing the need for structural cooperation not dependent on political elites. According to him, if we create independent system it does not matter who oversees decision-making, system works alone. Lastly, Mr. Kufčák pointed out that we are lacking heavy equipment and therefore not able to become a leader in regional defence. *“We are still living in times, in which the more tanks you have, the stronger you are.”* Mr. Kufčák hence sees an opportunity for the V4 to increase its tank capabilities.

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At the end of the panel discussion, the panellists disagreed with each other on certain expressed points, nonetheless they all appreciated different perspectives based on the different fields they work in. Mr. Kalmár reacted to Mr. Kufčák by saying that the V4 is doing lots of things together in the field of defence, but it does not mean that we have to do everything together. He then proceeded to touch upon the topic of defence budgets and the argument that raising budgets creates more incentives for cooperation, because we can observe the continuous development of more and more programmes. *“At the Ministry of Defence, we are busy looking for new ways of cooperation.”* The panellists disagreed on who should be responsible for resolving the migrant crisis. According to Mr. Kufčák, handling the migration crisis is also a military issue and the defence sector should play a role in resolving the crisis. Nonetheless, the panellist also agreed on certain points, for example on the need for common education and training of military personnel. They even proposed the creation of a V4 academy for soldiers, experts and military staff.

Following a captivating debate, there was a brief window for questions from the audience. The panellists were asked how strong pro-Russian sentiment in Visegrad countries really is and to what extent we are able to tackle the spread of disinformation and propaganda, which go hand in hand with said pro-Russian sentiment. Mr. Mizera pointed out that we are not dependent on Russia and that we do not have any sentiments for Russia whatsoever, as it's mostly the frustrated people on the internet and professional groups that are trying to change the course of our politics and society. Mr. Kalmár elaborated on the success of the Russian Federation in using means of hybrid warfare. According to him, Russia is still successful in using this modern tool, but Russian influence is ultimately waning, which is why they are using this asymmetrical tool of warfare. Mr. Kalmár ended the discussion by saying that Russia lacks enough soft power to be successful in their hybrid warfare strategy.

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