

BRIEF

REGIONAL COOPERATION
FOR A STRONGER NATO

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Since the 1990s, the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries have used regional political and military cooperation formats to advance their security interests in NATO. This cooperation has been most successful when the participants have had a clear goal in mind, as was the case after 2014 when the deteriorating security environment caused by Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine encouraged joint approaches from the region to strengthen NATO's collective defence. In the current debate about transforming the transatlantic community, a reinvigoration of regional cooperation is needed again if the CEE are to have a voice in shaping the ongoing changes in NATO and the EU.

EVOLVING GOALS OF
REGIONAL COOPERATION

Collaboration amongst the CEE countries was first developed as a supplementary tool to help pave the way for them to join the Euro-Atlantic structures. Poland, the Czech Republic, and

V4), the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – the B3) were also successful in developing joint military projects, notably BALTBAT, BALTNET, BALTRON and BALTDEFCOL.² However, without a common goal on the horizon, both Visegrád and Baltic politico-military cooperation stalled after accession to NATO. Instead, the countries started to look for ways to enhance military cooperation with the US or bigger European Allies.

The Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008 reinvigorated regional cooperation in both the Visegrád and Baltic formats. The aims now were to shape NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, to extend contingency planning to the region, to move Allied structures and exercises closer to the eastern flank, to uphold NATO's open door policy, and to maintain strong transatlantic ties. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia shared the view that the peaceful development of their region would need a strong Alliance and US engagement in Europe, even if, due to their geographical location, they did not themselves feel an immediate threat from Russia.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 bolstered the wish for more regional consultation and military

cooperation. The Russian military build-up in Crimea increased Romanian and Bulgarian anxieties and, together with the V4 and the Baltic states, these two countries initiated the Bucharest Nine (B9) consultation platform.³ In the 2015 B9 declaration, the group advocated a strategic adaptation of NATO through the strengthening of defence and deterrence, and

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Hungary coordinated policies prior to their NATO accession.¹ Having achieved this in 1999, they turned the focus of their cooperation towards helping Slovakia to catch up and become a member in 2004. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania cooperated during their own accession process to NATO, which was also finalised in 2004. By contrast with the Visegrád Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – the

expressed concerns about Russia's aggressive posturing.⁴ Coordinated regional pressure was helpful in shaping the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit outcomes, including the decision to deploy four NATO battlegroups to the eastern flank.

Limited military cooperation among the B9 states followed. The V4 countries each began to rotate a company through the Baltic states, with Poland continuously providing one for the NATO battlegroup in Latvia.⁵ Later, the Visegrád Group created the V4 Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters, while the Baltic states agreed on a joint input to the NATO Response Force. Poland has also continuously rotated a motorised infantry company through Romania, which in turn has provided air defence assets for the NATO battlegroup in Poland.

But overall, NATO's forward presence on the eastern flank, alongside the US deployment of an armoured brigade combat team to Poland, had a rather negative impact on political and military cooperation in the region. While the countries have continued to use cooperative formats (B3, V4, and B9) to express regional concerns in NATO, they have at the same time increasingly prioritised their relations with NATO's biggest allies and troop providers, with the aim of anchoring their military presence and engagement.

For all of them, deepening relations with the US has been key, but they have chosen to pursue this on bilateral paths with varying success. Poland has managed to secure an additional 1000 US troops on its territory, while Lithuania has achieved the rotational presence of a US armoured battalion. Romania too has consulted on the presence of rotating US units.⁶ Estonia has also prioritised relations with the UK and France, and Lithuania with Germany.⁷ The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary have oscillated between tightening relations with both France and Germany.

Bilateral cooperation with the biggest European Allies has been also strengthened by the involvement of B9 countries in French, German and British military cooperation formats in line with their national priorities—the European

Intervention Initiative (led by France), the Framework Nation Concept (Germany), and the Joint Expeditionary Force (UK, which is focused on cooperation in the Nordic-Baltic region). This strengthening of bilateral politico-military ties with the US, France, UK and Germany has been one of the factors hindering a joint regional approach to security and defence in the EU, and making it less pronounced in NATO. Another has been internal political challenges in the region.

THE NEED FOR NEW APPROACHES

The European and regional security environment is evolving. Both external threats and internal challenges are growing. The position of the US in the international system and within the transatlantic community has changed. Washington is increasingly preoccupied with a China that is ready to challenge US global standing and undermine the international liberal order. At the same time, relations between the US and Europe have declined as a consequence of the four strained years of the Trump administration and the departure of the UK, a leading transatlantic-minded European state, from the European Union.

A debate about EU's place in the world under the slogan of 'European strategic autonomy' is, meanwhile, being pushed forward by some EU member states and the European Commission. This also has a political dimension, with Germany and France reluctant to subscribe either to Trump's "great power rivalry" or to Biden's "competition between democratic and

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authoritarian systems" strategies towards China. Similarly, under the banner of technological sovereignty, the EU wants to catch up with US and Chinese companies in the domain of the new technologies that will shape the future balance of power in an increasingly digitalised world.

Last but not least, the EU is also looking for a role in the security and defence arena. Although NATO is recognised to be the main—or only—

organisation for Europe's collective defence, the EU has ambitions to do more in security policy. It is currently developing its own strategy, the Strategic Compass, which will define specific objectives in four main areas: crisis management, resilience, capability development, and partnerships.⁸ It is also expected to further develop the military-industrial cooperation initiatives that emerged in the EU after 2016 (Permanent Structured Cooperation, the European Defence Fund, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, and the European Peace Facility). Furthermore, there are proposals, for example from the European External Action Service, that go beyond this (as yet unfinished) business, according to which the EU should be more active in securing the global commons, and acting in the space, maritime and cyber domains.

Against this backdrop, NATO is working on an agenda for its next decade.⁹ This will likely result in the drafting and adoption of a new Strategic Concept. Deterrence of an aggressive Russia will firmly remain the Alliance's top priority. However, the burden-sharing debate, which aims to increase European military capabilities,

US rotational military presence on the eastern flank could become a useful platform to enhance military cooperation in a US-German-Polish-Baltic format

readiness and engagement to contribute to an enhanced deterrence posture will be an even more pressing issue. The rise of China looms large in NATO as well, not so much as a military concern, but a political, technological, and economic one. NATO and US officials claim that this will be a defining issue for the transatlantic community.¹⁰ Allied discussions are also considering emerging and disruptive technologies, resilience, and engagement in the South.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The transformation of the EU and NATO and developments in the US-European relationship may have a negative impact on the transatlantic link and thus affect European and regional security. Regional cooperation thus needs to be

reinvigorated. First, the eastern flank countries must ensure that their voice is more audible in intra-European discussions. They must devise joint narratives that underline the vital need to preserve a close US-EU relationship in a more competitive world. The region should coordinate more closely to ensure a balance is found between more European sovereignty and transatlantic cooperation in key issues such as China, Russia, and technology.

Second, the Bucharest Nine countries should undertake a coordinated rethink on how to engage western European Allies in deterring Russia on the eastern flank to a greater extent than they are today. One aspect will be to make sure that the obligations accepted by all Allies in the NATO Defence Planning Process, NATO Readiness Initiative and NATO Response Force are met. A second will be to find ways to fill gaps in the current deterrence posture on the eastern flank with regard to naval presence, air and missile defence and military mobility. But the European Allies will need to do more, and gradually supplement US troops in the region. In this way, the US rotational military presence on the eastern flank could become a useful platform to enhance military cooperation in a US-German-Polish-Baltic format. Units from European Allies might also gradually supplement the US rotations in Poland, the Baltic states, Romania, and Bulgaria. US activities on the northern and the southern

shores of the Baltic Sea could thus become a glue, tightening cooperation between Sweden and Finland on one hand and Poland and the Baltic states on the other.

Third, the countries of the region need to enhance cooperation in order to ensure that the EU's security and defence policy develops in full alignment with NATO.¹¹ More regional engagement (B3, V4, B9) in the discussions about the EU's Strategic Compass is needed to ensure: that first and foremost, the EU should take a broad civil-military approach to crisis management, without an excessive build-up of European military command structures; that EU security partnerships should also cover Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans countries; that the NDPP should be the benchmark in coordinating capability development between

the EU and NATO; that EU debates on resilience should be intertwined with those in the Alliance; and that the EU's existing military-industrial cooperation initiatives should be better used to serve the needs of NATO's collective defence.

Achieving all this will require a more coordinated regional engagement in these initiatives, and a clearer narrative. NATO-EU cooperation on all

these issues is a must, and it should be region's priority to encourage the closest possible linkage between the drafting of the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept. The countries of the region should not be complacent—the new challenges ahead will need more substantial cooperation in the future.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Robert Kupiecki, *Poland and NATO after the Cold War* (Warsaw: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2020), 47.
- ² BALTBAT—Baltic Battalion; BALTNET—Baltic Airspace Surveillance Network; BALTRON—Baltic [mine countermeasures] Squadron; BALTDEFCOL—Baltic Defence College: Tomas Jermalavičius, Pauli Järvenpää, Tomas Janeliūnas, Nora Vanaga, Justyna Gotkowska and Piotr Szymański, *NATO's Northeast Quartet: Prospects and Opportunities for Baltic-Polish Defence Cooperation* (Tallinn: ICDS, 2018), 1.
- ³ Marcin Terlikowski et al., "[The Bucharest 9: Delivering on the Promise to Become the Voice of the Eastern Flank](#)," *PISM Policy Paper* No. 4(164), June 2018.
- ⁴ Bucharest Nine, "[Joint Declaration on "Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility"](#)," Bucharest, November 2015.
- ⁵ Justyna Gotkowska, Piotr Szymański and Tomasz Dąbrowski, "[NATO's Eastern Flank – a new paradigm](#)," Centre for Eastern Studies, 13 July 2016.
- ⁶ Piotr Szymański and Justyna Gotkowska, "[US Army in Lithuania: a new outpost on the eastern flank](#)," Centre for Eastern Studies, 14 January 2021; Kamil Całus, Mateusz Gniazdowski and Justyna Gotkowska, "[Rumunia-USA: przedwyborcza intensyfikacja współpracy \[Romania-USA: intensification of cooperation before the election\]](#)," Centre for Eastern Studies, 23 October 2020.
- ⁷ Piotr Szymański, "[Seeking an additional reassurance. The EU and France in Estonia's security policy](#)," Centre for Eastern Studies, 23 September 2020.
- ⁸ Niklas Nováký *The Strategic Compass. Charting a New Course for the EU's Security and Defence Policy* (Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2020)
- ⁹ NATO, *NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General* (Brussels: NATO, 2020)
- ¹⁰ NATO, "[NATO2030: future-proofing the Alliance. Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference 2021 \(online event\)](#)," 19 February 2021.
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