

The V4 and EU Strategic Autonomy: Consensual Voice, Discordant Tones?

An analysis of the V4 approach to EU Common Security and Defence Policy

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Abstract

Since President Obama's Asian pivoting, the U.S. has engaged in a diplomatic retrenchment from European affairs, and Donald Trump has all but confirmed this underlying trend with recurring hostile statements towards the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This has revived the EU's 60-year old debate on the bloc's common defence and security framework, and pushed France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Angela Merkel to promote a greater autonomy of decision, capacity and capability of the EU in defence and security.

It is against this geopolitical backdrop and in this context of deteriorating U.S.-EU relations that the concept of "strategic autonomy" has emerged in the EU policy discussion¹. Broadly speaking, the concept aims at answering the following question: "What do we, Europeans, want to be able to achieve on our own?" For the French and, to a large extent, the Germans, strategic autonomy is a synonym of strategic capacity and strategic sovereignty. But do all EU Member States agree on the definition, even on the relevance of such a concept when it comes out as a potential direct conflicting alternative to NATO? In this regard, the Visegrad Group (V4) offers an enlightening example of the rationale and arguments of the EU

¹ For the sake of clarity, EU and Europe will be used interchangeably hereinafter.

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Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform is a network for structured dialog on issues of strategic regional importance. The network analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group, and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund.

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countries still reluctant to fully commit to the concept of strategic autonomy and its underlying political ambition. This paper aims at addressing the following questions:

- What do the V4's consensus and divergence, as regards European defence and security, tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of "EU strategic autonomy"?
- What concrete lessons can we draw from the V4 case study to enable greater EU resilience in defence and security?

Analysis

With the fall of the Berlin Wall that saw the old dream of German reunification come true, and the collapse of the Soviet Union that led to the end of the Cold War, we took our collective European security for granted. The so-called "eastern threat"² had suddenly faded away, and NATO had demonstrated its relevance, resilience and strength, eventually prevailing over the Warsaw Pact. In many regards, 1989 and its immediate geopolitical aftermaths came out as the combined success of NATO and the U.S.' European strategy³.

A quarter of a century later, the world seems to have fully entered the 21st century. New global security threats have surfaced (i.e. Islamist terrorism, cyberwarfare, etc.), China is flamboyantly (re)emerging, with proudly-stated ambition of global affluence, and we see the end of the US' monopoly on the setting of the global agenda. Europe is no longer at the centre of the stage. And not only has the spotlight been gone for some time, but European collective security, on which the U.S. had set their seal in 1989, is now subject to discussion, including in the White House⁴.

² Korbonski, Andrzej. "Eastern Europe and the Soviet Threat." *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 33, no. 1 (1978): 66-76.

³ Hutchings, Robert L. *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider's Account of US Diplomacy in Europe, 1989-1992*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press (1997).

⁴ Bond, Ian. "Trump Sounds the Retreat: Can European Defence Advance?". *CER Insight*. June 26, 2020.

Interestingly enough, some even venture into pointing out that the Cold War might not have ended entirely, and suggest it would appear more proper to talk of a metamorphosis of the ideological split that characterised the opposition of the U.S.-Soviet blocs⁵. And indeed, Europe's security is now more challenged than ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall. As such, 2014 marks a decisive turning point in the perception of the weakness of Europe's collective security framework as much as its exemplification. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the intensification of the violence that followed in Ukraine were but the first of a long series of major destabilising geopolitical events on Europe's eastern and southern flanks: Libya's second civil war in 2014, the migration crisis in 2015, the conflict in the eastern Mediterranean in 2020, etc. These are some of the great security challenges facing Europe today, and which call for a collective, scalable, comprehensive and actionable EU defence and security policy.

It is against this backdrop of new geopolitical challenges that the then newly-elected French President called for a renewing of the EU's defence and security framework. In his flagship Sorbonne speech (2017)⁶, Emmanuel Macron called for Europe to face the reality of its own weaknesses in defence and security, which was for too long considered as being America's business. A few months before, at the G7 in Sicily, Chancellor Angela Merkel had already advocated for more European involvement in European defence and security, arguing it was now time *"to take our fate into our own hands,"* without, however, cutting the ties of friendship and cooperation with the U.S. and other European traditional allies and partners⁷. And to emphasise what he sees as a survival challenge for Europe, President Macron

⁵ Westad, Odd Warne. "The Cold War and America's Delusion of Victory". *The New York Times*. August 28, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/opinion/cold-war-american-soviet-victory.html> (accessed October 14, 2020).

⁶ Macron, Emmanuel. "Initiative pour une Europe souveraine, unie et démocratique". Speech at Sorbonne University. Paris, September 26, 2017. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique> (accessed October 24, 2020).

⁷ Paravicini, Giulia. "Angela Merkel: Europe must take 'our fate' into own hands". *Politico*. May 28, 2017. <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-europe-cdu-must-take-its-fate-into-its-own-hands-elections-2017/> (accessed October 24, 2020).

denounced NATO's lethargic stance on most of the burning security issues of the day, and called for a refreshed approach to how Europe addresses its main defence and security challenges. He advocated for pushing for more operational and strategic autonomy in front of a "brain-dead" NATO⁸.

Nevertheless, the growing sense of U.S. disinterest and relative disengagement from Europe is not new. President Donald Trump's policy was but a confirmation – though less diplomatic and tactful – of an underlying trend already perceptible under President Obama⁹. Calling for a European strategic autonomy in reaction to President Trump's tweets or public declarations would therefore be strategically misguided and politically irrelevant.

In this respect, the Visegrad Group is somehow showing a more nuanced stance. It would seem insightful to analyse the rationale behind the V4 approach to European strategic autonomy, to what extent they support it, and why they want to set limitations to the concept. The V4 offers a good example of Central and Eastern Europe's concerns regarding the Franco-German proposal for a European strategic autonomy. But if all V4 countries voiced their political concerns, some, like Slovakia¹⁰ and the Czech Republic¹¹ acknowledged the need to do more between Europeans, without expecting everything from the "*American umbrella*".

European Security in 2020: A Turning Point?

Perhaps more than 2008, 2020 may well be remembered in collective European history as the year when the EU stood firm in the storm. With an unprecedented conjunction of crises,

⁸ "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead". *The Economist*. November 7, 2019.

⁹ Karl, David J. "Rejected: Why Obama Snubs Europe". *The National Interest*. April 1, 2015. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/rejected-why-obama-snubs-europe-12516> (accessed October 20, 2020).

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. "Foreign and European Policy of the Slovak Republic in 2020." <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4238286/200710-zahranicna-a-eurovska-politika-SR-v-roku-2020> (accessed November 21, 2020).

¹¹ AMO. "European defense between NATO and PESCO: Charting a course for Czech defense Policy". Policy Paper. December 2017. https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/AMO_European-defense-between-NATO-and-PESCO-Charting-a-course-for-Czech-defense-policy.pdf (accessed October 29, 2020).

(such as the COVID-19 pandemic, tensions at the EU's eastern border, in the eastern Mediterranean and in Belarus...), 2020 may not only have brought EU Member States closer to one another, but also revealed the resilience of the bloc.

Most prominently, the COVID-19 pandemic has come out as a wake-up call that Europe will become stronger, secure its interests and assert its place in the world if it speaks with one voice and tackles crises with a unique and comprehensive strategy. As Aleš Chmelař, Deputy Minister for Europe of the Czech Republic, put it, the EU will only grow stronger if it is able to demonstrate a *“united solution to the crises in future.”*¹²

The political crisis and the violent street protests that followed the highly disputed re-election of President Lukashenko of Belarus also put to test the EU's ability to deal with its eastern neighbours and to concretely address geopolitical challenges¹³.

Lastly, the defeat of Donald Trump and the victory of Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. presidential election is suggesting a likely change in the U.S.-EU relations, if not of policy at least of atmosphere, with some hoping for a rebalancing of the relationship under a more pro-European Biden Administration and calling for an upholding of the Transatlantic bond.¹⁵ But across EU capitals, few believe that a Biden Administration will mean a return to the heyday of the Transatlantic relationship, in part because the next U.S. President will first need to focus on more urgent matters at home, such as the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-economic crisis that is unfolding¹⁶.

¹² GLOBSEC. “The V4 European and Transatlantic Priorities in the Post COVID-19 Environment”. Summary. <https://www.globsec.org/2020/06/29/the-v4-priorities-post-covid-19/> (accessed October 10, 2020).

¹³ Von der Burchard, Hans. “EU agrees new Belarus sanctions targeting Lukashenko”. *Politico*. November 4, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-belarus-sanctions-alexander-lukashenko/> (accessed November 4, 2020).

¹⁵ Kramp-Karrenbauer, Annegret. “Europe still needs America”. *Politico*. November, 2 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-still-needs-america/> (accessed November 2, 2020).

¹⁶ Birnbaum, Michael. Morris, Loveday. “Whether Trump or Biden wins, Europe doesn't think it can depend on U.S.”. *The Washington Post*. October 30, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/europe-trump-biden-election/2020/10/30/7f7e6a62-188a-11eb-8bda-814ca56e138b_story.html (accessed November 12, 2020).

In this global geopolitical context, EU leaders, like Emmanuel Macron, emboldened by the EU Covid recovery package and historic agreement for a mutual debt decided by the EU Council in July 2020, believe the time has come for greater defence policy convergence and more integration towards EU strategic autonomy.¹⁷ But as the calls for more strategic or operational autonomy are growing, some wonder what the concept really covers¹⁸, and whether it should mean cutting ties with the U.S. and/or lead to even greater political integration. In both cases, the risk is for strategic autonomy to be defined by Northern and Central European states as another Trojan horse of political integration. Yet, originally falling under the scope of defence and security policy, more properly called the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), strategic autonomy was met with some significant support in the V4¹⁹. And the Visegrad Group's arguments to both embrace and reject it may unveil a lot on why and how the concept of strategic autonomy, enlarged to encompass fields other than CSDP (such as health, data, energy, industry), might fail in the future.

In this regard, two key issues should be thoroughly taken into account: the V4's unconditional commitment to NATO, and the conditions under which the V4 is willing to further contribute to CSDP's initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF).

V4 and NATO: A non-negotiable commitment

Since the fall of communism and their transition to democracy (barely 30 years ago), the V4 countries have invested a lot of political energy to join the Atlantic Alliance, upon which they have relied ever since for their security. An important historical point, too often overlooked,

¹⁷ The Economist. "Emmanuel Macron revives a post-war institution for a post-covid era". September 5, 2020.

¹⁸ Tamma, Paola. "Europe wants 'strategic autonomy' — it just has to decide what that means". *Politico*. October 15, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-trade-wants-strategic-autonomy-decide-what-means/> (accessed October 16, 2020).

¹⁹ Dostál, Vít. Végh, Zsuzsanna. "For Visegrad, CSDP is Ineffective but EU should Gain Strategic Independence". *European Security Journal*. November 27, 2017. <https://www.esjnews.com/visegrad-security-trends> (accessed November 12, 2020).

lies in the chronology of NATO and EU memberships of V4 countries, and which may, in itself, say a lot about the visceral attachment of the group to NATO. Indeed, when all four countries joined the EU on 1 May 2004, three of them, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, had already been NATO members for four years (1999). Only Slovakia joined NATO on the same year of its accession to the EU. This simple historical reminder may allow us to understand, to a certain extent, the order of political priorities of a country like Poland, that may have preferred to strengthen its relations with both the Alliance and Washington, rather than increasing defence cooperation with the EU and its regional partners²⁰. Logically enough, being the youngest NATO member amongst the four, Slovakia is also the one to demonstrate the frankest openness towards greater EU defence cooperation, and the V4 country with the least pro-Atlantic public opinion²¹. But it would be improper to explain the V4's attachment to NATO in the sole light of history. National threat perceptions also matter a great deal. And with the current situation in Ukraine and the military involvement of Russia in the country, the objective likelihood of conventional conflict on Poland's northern and eastern border and aggression from Russia remains fair, however limited. In this regard, Poland's defence priorities will always, at least for the time being and the near future, align with those of the Baltic States. As such, Poland is a key actor of NATO's eastern flank defence, and therefore sees any attempt to undermine NATO as a threat to its own national security. In this sense, Warsaw can only consider regional defence integration through the lens of NATO. It's worth mentioning, however, that Poland is not alone in its steadfast commitment to uphold NATO deterrence capacity, as it is a priority equally shared amongst the V4.

But national threat perception is not the only reason behind the V4's prioritisation of NATO over EU's defence integration initiatives. As a cornerstone of both national defence planning and V4 regional defence coordination, NATO is not an incidental factor one may easily take

²⁰ Muti, Karolina. "Poland: The Missing Link in European Defence". *IAI Commentaries*. September 21, 2018.

²¹ GLOBSEC. "GLOBSEC Trends 2019". <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf> (accessed October 25, 2020).

out of the equation overnight. It is deeply embedded in the national defence culture as much as it is in the national as well as Central European security framework. National cycles of procurement and capability development planning are mostly calibrated to fulfil national's commitment to NATO. This is exemplified in the V4 battlegroup's coordination with the NATO Response Force²² and the V4 training & exercise strategy²³ aimed at reaching NATO High Readiness goals, all stemming from the V4's "Long-Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening their Defence Cooperation". Signed in March 2014, this flagship blueprint for defence partnership sets three key priorities for regional cooperation, all of which are also aimed at driving national defence planning priorities: 1) capability development, procurement & defence industry cooperation; 2) development of transnational units and increase of cross-border activities and military mobility facilitation; 3) strengthening of defence culture and education, increase of common training & exercising. Increasing cooperation culture by organising more regular common troop and cross-border exercises is also aimed at strengthening forces readiness and interoperability, two fundamental goals of NATO. Forces readiness coordination is not only a priority of the V4 Long-Term Vision, but also of the V4's joint exercise within NATO as shows their involvement in the Alliance's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). This is perhaps one the most important points to stress here, as it is in the light of its initiatives contribution and support to NATO interoperability and forces readiness that all Visegrad countries are assessing the relevance of PESCO. From a V4 standpoint, PESCO initiatives therefore only make sense if these enable synergies and cost-effectiveness through capability-driven defence cooperation. Does it mean that all V4 countries reject a more industry-driven cooperation? Not necessarily, as Poland -with the strongest defence industry amongst V4 countries and clear ambitions to make it even more resilient and competitive-, as much as its

²² Urbanovska, Jana, Paulech, Michal. "Visegrad Four EU Battlegroup: Meaning and Progress". *Obrana a strategie* 14, no. 2 (2014): 49-60.

²³ Visegrad Group. "Bratislava Declaration of Visegrad Group Heads of Government Deepening V4 Defence Cooperation". 2015. <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/51419/Bratislava+Declaration+FINAL.pdf/8befd1e0-ae11-48a4-9e77-bf216a46c091> (accessed October 26, 2020).

V4 partners, cannot ignore the positive prospect of a stronger EU military industry for its defence industry and thousands of jobs at stake²⁴. Slovakia and the Czech Republic are well aware of the opportunity of defence investment and army modernisation offered by PESCO and the European Defence Fund (EDF)^{25,26}. While PESCO enables cooperation with several EU Member States on projects of high priority for the Slovak Armed Forces, such as the Self-Propelled Artillery Unit, retained as a PESCO project in as early as December 2017, EDF contributes to alleviate the pressure on national budgets²⁷. And we touch upon an important point here: if the EDF is indeed a strong argument to win over the most reluctant countries, it needs, however, to be financially consistent to remain politically credible. As such, the recent cuts decided by the EU Commission and approved by the Parliament, that would downsize the allocation package to the EDF by nearly 40%, are not an encouraging sign²⁸.

Lastly, migration is a common and burning concern amongst the V4, which has significantly contributed to cement the group's political coherence since the 2015 migration crisis. As the keystone of the EU's fragile south-eastern neighbourhood, Turkey is a strategic country. With more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees on its territory, Turkey is a buffer state of fundamental importance to the EU and, even more so, to the V4²⁹. That is why the recent calls for increased sanctions on Turkey and further steps to isolate Ankara have been met with tepidity in V4 capitals, who consider Turkey too important a partner (and NATO's

²⁴ Office of the Government. "Prime Minister: We need strong defence industry, there is no strong army without it". November 27, 2019. <https://www.premier.gov.pl/en/news/news/prime-minister-we-need-strong-defence-industry-there-is-no-strong-army-without-it.html> (accessed November 16, 2020).

²⁵ Visegrad Group. "PESCO opportunity for Czech defence industry, says minister". December 11, 2017. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/news/pesco-opportunity-for> (accessed November 16, 2020).

²⁶ Spectator SME. "Slovakia joins PESCO initiative". November 13, 2017. <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20695566/slovakia-joins-pesco-initiative.html> (accessed November 17, 2020).

²⁷ See : Ianakiev, Gueorgui. "The European Defence Fund, A Game Changer for European Defence Industrial Collaboration". Policy Paper. *Armament Industry European Research Group*. November 2019.

²⁸ CGTN. "EU states warned not to cut defense spending amid pandemic". November 18, 2020. <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-18/EU-states-warned-not-to-cut-defense-spending-amid-pandemic-Vv5KKiqfyU/index.html> (accessed November 18, 2020).

²⁹ UNHCR. "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey". <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey> (accessed November 16, 2020).

second biggest army) to antagonise. From the V4 standpoint, NATO should therefore serve as the privileged platform of dialogue with Turkey, and work to avoid confrontations that would isolate a partner country crucially located on the south-eastern migration route.

V4 and CSDP: Towards a Greater Participation but with Uneven Levels of Engagement

The economic crisis triggered by the COVID pandemic will have significant impacts on national defence expenditures, while the need for military equipment modernisation will grow. As we underlined earlier, this all occurs in a global context of great geopolitical instability, especially on the eastern and southern flanks of both the EU and NATO. This provides CSDP initiatives with a favourable ground to appeal to the V4. And as Andrzej Sadoś, the Polish permanent representative to the EU, highlighted, *“as the world struggles with a global pandemic, the US navigates its post-election reality and China's role on a world stage is changing, European defence cooperation is ever more important.”*³⁰ And indeed, even Poland, in spite of its “reflexive Atlantism”³¹, and though hesitant until the last minute, joined PESCO, convinced by the participation of its Baltic partners. It has now committed to the Lithuanian-led project on cyber defence, the Cyber Rapid Response Teams & Mutual Assistance in Cybersecurity Programme (November 2018). Warsaw sees it as an opportunity to increase synergies in defending NATO’s eastern flank. This is a very good example of where a V4 country, as reluctant to defence cooperation outside NATO as Poland, is convinced to take an active part in a PESCO project: when EU and NATO purposes converge. This is also a reason why Poland is still relatively reluctant to industry-driven projects, and advocates for a more capability-driven strategic autonomy. In this regard, Poland’s letter of intent to join PESCO addressed to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, pinning down 3 conditions for its participation, is insightful: 1) primacy of NATO’s defence planning; 2) competitive as well as geographically

³⁰ Sadoś, Andrzej. “How to further develop European security and defence cooperation”. *Euractiv*. November 6, 2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/opinion/how-to-further-develop-european-security-and-defence-cooperation/> (accessed November 8, 2020).

³¹ See : Harnisch, Sebastian. Frank, Cornelia. Maull, Hanns W. *Role Theory in International Relations*. Taylor & Francis, 2011: 145.

balanced development of the EU defence industry in order to suit all participating Member States; 3) a 360-degree approach to security challenges, with particular attention to the EU's eastern border³².

Therefore, Poland doesn't deny the relevance or legitimacy of PESCO, but highlights the importance of preventing competition between NATO and EU initiatives, and the necessity of working on convergence of NATO and EU purposes and ensure that the fundamental principle of interoperability between NATO and EU Member States is upheld, a principle equally shared amongst the V4, as stressed earlier.

But other V4 countries seem more eager to support greater efforts to further EU defence integration, such as Hungary, whose Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been advocating for an autonomous EU military force for some time³³. Although still a premature project at this stage, the idea has also been supported by the Czech Republic with then Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka stating that the proposal of a joint EU army should be seriously considered, in spite of the technical and political challenges induced³⁴. This highly sensitive question of an EU army is a good example of the diverging approaches to EU defence integration within the Visegrad.

Some political concerns, however, remain evenly shared between the V4 countries. As with any new EU cooperation framework, the spectre of Franco-German influence is not far away. Whence Poland's call for a balanced development of the EU defence industry. For Warsaw, it is essential to send a clear signal that the industrial appetite of Paris and Berlin (the two leading defence industries in Europe) may be a significant impediment to further V4 participation in the future, and that it could, incidentally, only be reined in with the

³² European Parliament. "Permanent structured cooperation (PESCO): Beyond establishment". Briefing, March 2018. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614739/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)614739_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614739/EPRS_BRI(2018)614739_EN.pdf) (accessed November 22, 2020).

³³ Kroet, Cynthia. "Viktor Orbán wants an EU military force." *Politico*. August 26, 2016. <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-wants-an-eu-military-force/> (accessed November 22, 2020)

³⁴ BBC. "Czechs and Hungarians call for EU army amid security worries". August 26, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37196802> (accessed November 22, 2020).

contribution of third countries, first amongst which the UK. As a consequence, and this is equally shared amongst V4 countries, PESCO projects should be open to close allies, NATO and non-NATO members alike, such as the UK. The door should remain open for the UK to stay involved in CSDP, whether for capability or industrial cooperation, whatever the outcome of the on-going Brexit negotiations.³⁵ In this regard, the recent decision of the EU Council to set out conditions for third-state participation in PESCO projects was met very positively across the V4³⁶. And the best guarantee of a balanced EU military industry development would either be to deploy production plants on the territory of the country leading the PESCO project and/or to ensure that the country of origin of the participating defence corporations may not be the same where these companies will build their production facilities. Should the V4 concretely see the benefits of PESCO projects in terms of investment on their territory (along with the correlated impact on local employment), then CSDP would be more clearly seen as an opportunity not just for enhanced defence interoperability with greater synergies at a lower cost, but also as an opportunity for the V4 national defence industries to become more competitive, scale-up more quickly, thereby opening the door to increased exports and hire a greater number of domestic workers.

A good example, although not in a PESCO context, is the decision of German Rheinmetall AG defence group to build the majority of its Lynx KF41 infantry fighting vehicle (IFVs) in the buyer's country, that is: Hungary. With a EUR-2-billion contract and 218 IFVs purchased, the decision of Rheinmetall to assemble 172 units at Zalaegerszeg, in Western Hungary, is far from insignificant, as it will imply another EUR-168-million investment to build the military

³⁵ Trevor Taylor. "Brexit's Implications for UK Defence Industrial Cooperation with Europe." RUSI Commentary, 5 November 2020. <https://rusi.org/commentary/brexit-implications-uk-defence-industrial-cooperation-europe> (accessed November 22, 2020).

³⁶ For more details on EU Member States approach to third-country participation, see: Brudzińska, Kinga. Kudzko, Alena. Zaborowski, Marcin. "Third-Country Participation in EU Defence Integration: How it Works and How it is Viewed by EU Member States". GLOBSEC Policy Institute. October 2020. https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GLOBSEC_Third-country-participation-in-EU-defence-integration-initiatives.pdf (accessed November 3, 2020).

production base in addition to the already-existing plant, by building a 20-hectare test field³⁷. With an estimated 500 jobs created, Rheinmetall's project shows, if need be, that of all public investments, defence is that with the highest return-on-investment ratio.³⁸ If the German defence group also wins the Czech tender for the same IFVs, it will send a very strong signal to the V4 that EU military industrial development is not just strategically relevant for the bloc, it is also economically profitable.

Furthermore, focusing on the countries' planning priorities and immediate threat challenges is essential. And by overlooking the rightful concerns of the region, CSDP and other defence cooperation initiatives, such as the flagship French European Intervention Initiative (E2I), out of which all V4 countries have been kept thus far, run the risk of alienating the V4 and losing precious political momentum. The case of the E2I, launched by Emmanuel Macron in 2018, in the wake of his Sorbonne Speech, is a revealing example of the divergence of methodological approach to cooperation initiatives between Paris-Berlin and the V4. Indeed, laying the foundation for cooperation outside the EU institutional framework and with a limited number of Member States, E2I adds up to an already complex galaxy of EU tools and acronyms (PESCO, CARD, EDF and others). Excluding all V4 countries and Baltic States (with the exception of Estonia) has sent a politically negative message to the region, already wary of Franco-German initiatives in defence cooperation. Building trust between Western Europe and the V4 would call for a reversal of the methodological approach: content and projects should prevail over heavy political structures. In other words, content first, structures second.

³⁷ ReMix. "Hungary to build country's largest military production facility with Germany's Rheinmetall". September 2020. <https://rmx.news/article/article/hungary-to-build-country-s-largest-military-production-facility-to-produce-german-rheinmetall-infantry-fighting-vehicles> (accessed October 10, 2020).

³⁸ Brandon K. Chicotsky. "Investment Returns in the Defense Industry." John Hopkins University Carey Business School, August 2017. <https://carey.jhu.edu/carey-the-torch/2017/08/investment-returns-in-the-defense-industry/> (accessed November 22, 2020).

Lastly, if Poland is concerned by NATO's eastern flank, Hungary, on the other hand, will be looking more to the south, and pay closer attention to the migration routes and the Balkans. Slovakia, like the Czech Republic, is more concerned by cyber networks security and [disinformation](#)³⁹. Therefore, by concretely addressing participating states' direct security concerns, PESCO projects could gain more attraction and appeal further to reluctant countries.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the debate around EU strategic autonomy is not a unitary one. And the V4, however aligned in its commitment to NATO, cannot be grasped as a homogeneous group when it comes to EU defence cooperation and CSDP initiatives. While all V4 countries have joined PESCO (each of them leading one project and participating in at least five others), they remain cautious about the political nature of cooperation initiatives. And perhaps more importantly, the V4 remains wary of a concept of strategic autonomy that would go beyond the mere scope of defence and security, and embrace other issues likely to affect their relationship with the U.S. and NATO. The framing of the concept is therefore as important as its content. And as far as CSDP is concerned, the V4 reactions show that it is vital to position PESCO and EDF in the light of NATO: in other words, showing how CSDP initiatives can help Member States to fulfil their NATO commitments more quickly and at a lower cost. Let's also stress that if PESCO contributes indeed to increase states' capabilities, it does not brand them with an EU flag: by making EU countries' defence stronger and more resilient, PESCO therefore makes EU-NATO Member States stronger and more resilient.

The V4 case study also highlights the importance of increased EU-NATO interoperability and cooperation, but also of the complementarity –if not convergence- of priorities. In this regard, the so-called eastern flank is an illustrative example: by enhancing cooperation and

³⁹ Katarina Klingova. "Infodemic' hit Slovakia as well. Fear and uncertainty are fertile ground for spreading of false content and conspiracies." GLOBSEC April 2020. <https://www.globsec.org/2020/04/04/infodemic-hit-slovakia-as-well/> (accessed November 16, 2020).

prioritising forces readiness, cross-border mobility and deterrence, the EU and NATO increase their joint defence and deterrence credibility.

Lastly, and this is perhaps the most salient point of this research, keeping the V4 engaged in the global EU discussion on defence cooperation is essential. A multi-speed EU of defence would be the greatest impediment to its success and resilience in the long run. As such, the exclusion of the V4 from the E2I came out as a wrong political message at a time when the challenge is to do more *together*.

All in all, rebalancing from NATO towards CSDP at large will take time, and that is why all V4 countries are advocating for a progressive approach and a slower pace, so as to let the new PESCO/EDF framework bear fruits: in this regard, all 4 countries are aligned insofar as they push for less horizontal growth and a more vertical approach (fewer projects but better measurable achievements). One crucial issue, however, remains: that of the EU's budgetary dedication to enhance defence cooperation. While the V4 have made military mobility one of the key objectives of their defence cooperation (including within the Central European Defence Cooperation Framework), the EU Commission considered cutting all funding to military mobility in its Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) revision proposals in early 2020. In this regard, the political stakes are high. And any increase of structural funds to defence infrastructure development and to the EDF and EPF (European Peace Fund) could be interpreted by the V4 as a clear signal that the EU is able to financially deliver to meet its geopolitical ambitions.

Bridging the Euro-V4 Gap in Defence Cooperation: Some Key Recommendations

- **Uphold the role of NATO as a catalyst** for European resilience potential in defence and security;
- **Enhance, wherever possible, EU-NATO capability cooperation**, with common training & exercise in particular;

- As such, **promote NATO as a platform for dialogue with Turkey**, whose position in the migration routes is crucial; avoid isolating Turkey is key for the V4 as much as for Europe;
- No contradiction between Franco-German strategic autonomy concept and Euro-Atlantic cooperation as long as **NATO interoperability and procurement principals are upheld and fulfilled**;
- National capabilities must be developed and deployed for both EU and NATO purposes: **convergence is essential**;
- Make **defence industrial development a top EU priority** and put it at the heart of the strategic autonomy concept/framework: it is essential to make it more appealing to V4 and prove it isn't the Trojan horse of further political integration;
- Consequently, **more structural funds** need to be allocated to **military mobility & infrastructure and cyber & networks security** (two top priorities of both the V4 and a majority of EU member States);
- Therefore, future **updates of the MFF** will need to reflect it with an **increase of defence expenditure lines in the EU budget** (both structural funds and EDF);
- Favour a **Euro-Russian dialogue table** and **avoid bilateral channels** that would deprive the V4 and other EU countries of their seat at the table;
- **Revive and update the Weimar Triangle** by turning into a France + Germany + V4 format, with bi-annual meetings and a clear defence cooperation and regional dialogue agenda (e.g. dialogue with Russia...);
- As regards CSDP and related tools and mechanisms (PESCO, E2I): reverse the current methodological approach, under which the political structure prevails over content and projects: start with pilot cooperation projects first before creating further **administrative heaviness**. This will contribute to build trust amongst partners and convince the most tepid states;

- **Increase strategic foresight** and the ex-ante measurement of the strategic impact of decisions (content should prevail over structures); E2I provides for strategic foresight, but V4 is excluded;
- **Border control** should be addressed as part of the discussion on strategic autonomy; even more important that it is indeed a purely European problem (U.S. not directly concerned).

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