



Hidden potential: the V4–US relationship and its current course¹

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The website visegradgroup.eu defines the V4 as a group that “reflects the efforts of the countries of the Central European region to work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration.”² The original purpose of the V4 (then V3) was to create and develop a platform for closer regional cooperation. The areas of cooperation vary – from cultural, educational, and social, to discussing military and defense cooperation. For the purpose of this paper I will focus on these latter two.

Historically, the relationship between the Visegrad countries and the United States has been established across several dimensions. The first dimension is that of US–V4, which is the most undefined and ambiguous of these relationships. The ambiguity is caused mainly by the lack of institutionalization within the V4, with the result that there is no “one voice” at the diplomatic level that could speak for the V4 as a whole. The second dimension of this relationship – which in fact defines the first dimension – is the partnership between the United States and individual V4 countries on a bilateral level. This dimension is more comprehensive, being based on the practical interests of the respective countries. However, unlike the V4’s other formats (e.g. V4+Germany), the bilateral relationships between V4 countries and the United States are not so much under the scrutiny of the rest of the V4. The third dimension is more complex. It is the intersected relationship between the V4 countries, the US, and NATO. NATO – both its political format in the North Atlantic Council and its military format in the Military Committee – are good discussion platforms, and NATO summits (which include all involved partners) often provide a good stage for the exchange of ideas and for arriving at common goals and strategies.

The relationship itself has evolved, from the time when Czechoslovakia was still one state and what is called now the V4 was a group of three states. Today, there is the general feeling that the American footprint which was so present and vivid during the tumultuous period of the early 1990s is slowly fading away, and that there is the need for a reboot or even a renaissance of that relationship. The first part of this paper takes a look at the history of the relationship. The subsequent parts describe some of the current examples of cooperation,

¹ The research for this text was partly conducted during a fellowship at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Budapest in 2014 as part of the “V4 Flying Experts Initiative” financed by the International Visegrad Fund.

² “About the Visegrad Group,” Visegrad Group official web site. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

both successful and somewhat less than successful. The paper argues that the most important dimension of the US–V4 partnership is that conducted on a bilateral basis and later translated into cooperation within the V4. To claim that the V4 should adopt a common strategy for cooperating with regional or global players is not only premature, but, as this paper argues, there is no need for such a common platform. Time that would presumably be wasted, without finding almost any common ground suitable for all four countries, can be better invested in a bilateral platform. Nevertheless, the relationships of V4 countries, whether outside or within the V4, should continue to be based on pre-agreed common values and trust between the partners.

History

Historical personalities had begun to lay the groundwork for cooperation within the region decades before the V4 as a platform was formally established. The relationship between the United States and Central Europe can be dated to even before the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, then still a part of the Austro–Hungarian Empire. The first Czechoslovak Republic's Declaration of independence was based on the "Fourteen points" presented by US President Woodrow Wilson. In its Preamble President Wilson declared that the treaty made it "possible for every nation whose purposes are consistent with justice and the peace of the world to avow now or at any other time the objects it has in view."³ Furthermore, the Treaty said that the world should be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression.⁴

The particular note on nations and their right to self-determination and existence inspired a vivid debate in Czechoslovakia, which led to the creation of a common nation state, albeit not always without problems or misunderstandings.

During the interwar period, the United States tried to find its rhythm in Europe. By entering the First World War, it broke its pledge of the previous century – written by US Secretary of State John Q. Adams and later known as the Monroe Doctrine – which was based on non-interventionism. The Americans for a long time refused to entangle the country in European wars. During the period which Frank Costigliola has labeled its "Awkward Dominion,"⁵ the United States maintained very sporadic relationships with Europe, and was not concerned with the region of Central Europe at all. The relationship was often limited to the "special relationship" between America and Great Britain. In the meantime, Americans focused their objectives and attention on Asia, and on creating a trade partnership with the continent.

The post-War presidents showed some interest in Europe. However, they were mainly focused on the failing League of Nations⁶ (of which American never had become a part), on the semi-

³ "Transcript of President Woodrow Wilson's 14 points (1918)," *Ourdocuments.gov*. Available online: <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=62&page=transcript> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

⁴ Ibid

⁵ F. Costigliola, *Awkward dominion: American political, economic and cultural relations with Europe, 1919–1933*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, p.13.

⁶ An intergovernmental organization, functioning between 1920 and 1946, generally regarded as a failure but an important precursor of the United Nations.

failing Kellogg-Briand Pact,⁷ or on establishing relations with young Bolshevik Russia. American presidents Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, and even Franklin D. Roosevelt were more interested in isolationism or selective diplomatic interventionism – developing the already established trade in Asia and maintaining a good relationship with their southern partners in Latin America – than in Europe. American interest at this time rarely looked east of Great Britain.

The United States was not even present at the Munich conference in 1938, which resulted in a weak deal that later led to the direct or indirect occupation of Czechoslovakia and other countries by Adolf Hitler. Even after Germany had attacked Poland, Roosevelt decided to help only the French and the British, without taking any action towards saving the region of Central Europe. With its grand entrance onto the European battlefield (by opening the Second Front in France), the US set their fighting foot in Europe in strong measure, and in the course of difficult battles ranging from Italy to Germany assisted significantly in defeating Europe's worst nightmare. At the end of World War II, the troops of General George S. Patton rested in the town of Plzeň in Czechoslovakia. Patton, who had expressed publicly his negative view of the Soviet Union (although an ally in the war), wished to go further with his men. He was denied the race into Prague by General Eisenhower.⁸ In the interim, the Red Army had already taken Berlin by storm, which was followed by the German capitulation, and thus for the US the War in Europe was over.

Strong US involvement in the region ended along with the war, and all three countries – Poland, reunited Czechoslovakia, and Hungary – came under Soviet influence until the late 1980s. Under Stalin's pressure the satellite countries rejected a recovery plan for post-War Europe known as the Marshall Plan, which as a result was implemented only in Western and Southern Europe. Igor Lukeš, an American professor of Czech origin, describes in detail the initial failures of American diplomacy in Czechoslovakia on the brink of the Communist coup in the years following the end of the War.⁹

During the Cold War, the US strategy towards Europe was part of a grand chessboard with the Soviet Union playing on the other side. Americans saw Europe as a divided stronghold – which fortunately did not end like other proxy areas such as Vietnam and Korea, where the two great powers measured their strength using conventional warfare. As far as Central Europe was concerned, United States diplomacy failed to seriously address either the Revolution of 1956 in Hungary or the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, beyond a brief mention of the events. The former was condemned by the Eisenhower administration,¹⁰ which however was far more preoccupied with the Suez Crisis. The latter caused Lyndon Johnson, still mired in Vietnam mud, to cancel the upcoming summit with his Soviet counterpart Leonid Brezhnev and to call for the withdrawal of the Warsaw Pact troops.¹¹ There was no further action.

⁷ A deal meant to outlaw war as a means of solving international problems. As in the case of the League of Nations, the Kellogg-Briand Pact did not prevent the Second World War but some of its provisions were later implemented into the UN Charter.

⁸ A. Axelrod, *Patton: a biography*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 162.

⁹ I. Lukeš, *Československo nad propastí: Selhání amerických diplomatů a tajných služeb v Praze 1945–1948*, [Czechoslovakia on the precipice: The failure of American diplomats and secret services in Prague 1945–1948], Prague: Prostor, 2014, p. 50.

¹⁰ D. D. Eisenhower, "Annual message to the Congress on the State of the Union," *The American Presidency Project*, January 10, 1957. Available online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11029> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

¹¹ L. B. Johnson, "Statement by the President Calling on the Warsaw Pact Allies To Withdraw From Czechoslovakia," *The American Presidency Project*, August 21, 1968. Available online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29088> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

When Central Europe witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, and sweeping revolutions flung the region into the orbit of European democracies, its relationship with the United States – which ceased to be a fearful enemy overnight – swiftly reached its highest peak. This resulted (in the 1990s) in strong US support for the transatlantic integration of all the V4 countries – particularly during the Clinton administration. It was due to the fact that his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was of Czechoslovak origin.

The relationship of the 1990s, however, did not outweigh the immense changes that were to come in the following decade. With the disastrous al Kaida attack of September 11th 2001, and the US overwhelmingly preoccupied with the far-reaching strategy of its Global War on Terror. The V4 countries found themselves in the position of being seen primarily as NATO allies rather than as individual partners (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland joining NATO in 1999, and Slovakia in 2004).

With new threats on the horizon, the V4 region has become the centre of attention again. After the Russian annexation of Crimea, the notion of interchangeable borders has been denounced. Energy security has become crucial for the region, and establishing a long-term and safe flow of energy supplies – i.e. replacing Russia as the sole source of energy – should be one of its top priorities. The threat of Daesh and other forms of extremist terrorism is a daily reminder to world leaders that the Global War on Terror is far from over. Although the region is not high on the list of potential terrorist targets, the attacks seen in other European countries have shown that there is no place to hide.

The V4 region has a lot to offer. Its geographical position suggests that it can be of use for dealing with Western Balkan countries, Ukraine, and the Baltic countries. The region itself has a rich experience in the transition to democracy, and this – and not only matters related to security and defense – should be noted and appreciated by the United States.

US relations in the Visegrad presidencies

The V4 presidency rotates every year starting on July 1st. During this period the presiding country leads all meetings and is in a position, if willing, to promote and offer its own solutions to regional and international problems. This section examines the last four V4 presidencies – those held by the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary respectively, and the recent Slovak presidency which ended in June 2015. Earlier presidencies will remain unexamined due to lack of space.

The Czech presidency of 2011 to 2012, named “Innovative Visegrad,” focused mainly on cooperation within the V4, and also on the V4+ format which includes one or more countries from outside the V4. Its relationship with the United States was limited to formal and informal consultations with American representatives.¹²

The Polish presidency of 2012 to 2013, labeled “Visegrad 4 Integration and Cohesion,” was no different. In its final report, the United States and its connection to the V4 is rarely mentioned.

¹² “Innovative Visegrad: Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2011–2012,” Visegrad Group, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/innovative-visegrad> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

Its focus rather was placed on cooperation in the V4+ model. On the other hand, the European Union was mentioned much more than in the previous presidency.¹³

During the Hungarian presidency of 2013 to 2014, the US surprisingly was mentioned on more levels. First, the Hungarians called for V4-US cooperation in their military commitment to Europe. Second, the presidency was to focus on energy security, and further the endeavor for the stronger energy independence of the region. Next, cooperation should focus on the Eastern Partnership program and the planned Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), one of the most important trade deals between the EU and the United States.¹⁴ However, tension between the United States and Hungary escalated towards the end of 2014. It included accusations of corruption within the Orban government, and resulted in a diplomatic war between Hungary and the US Embassy in Budapest.¹⁵

The Slovak presidency's proposal declared the United States the "most important global partner"¹⁶ for the V4. It proposed roundtables and set TTIP and Liquefied natural gas (LNG) deals as priorities. While all this may give the impression that the United States is raising awareness among the leaders of V4 countries, the actual activities of these countries suggest a different approach.

Visegrad and Obama – the US's assessment of the V4

Although according to some, Republican administrations tend to have worse relations with Europe – in particular Central Europe – than their Democratic counterparts, by looking at the latest two administrations we are provided with an example of the reverse. George W. Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had a deep connection to the region and to the history of the Soviet Union, penning her PhD dissertation¹⁷ on the Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak Army, a work that was later published as *The Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak Army, 1948–1983: uncertain allegiance*. In 2005, Bratislava hosted the Slovakia Summit between presidents Bush and Vladimir Putin.

The incoming Barack Obama administration experience a rocky start to their relationships in the Central European region. On July 16, 2009, the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* published an open letter addressed to the new administration, signed by two dozen well-known intellectuals, and former and current politicians, urging the United States not to

¹³ "2012/2013 Polish Presidency: Visegrad 4 integration and cohesion," Visegradgroup.eu. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/2012-2013-polish> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

¹⁴ "2013–2014 Hungarian Presidency," Visegradgroup.eu. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20132014-hungarian> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

¹⁵ "Hungary's tax chief says she is on U.S. travel ban list: paper," *Reuters*, November 5, 2014. Available online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/05/us-hungary-usa-corruption-idUSKBN0IP10J20141105> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

¹⁶ "Dynamic Visegrad for Europe and Beyond—Program of the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Group (July 2014–June 2015), Visegradgroup.eu. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20142015-slovak> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

¹⁷ Coincidentally enough, Rice studied at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies. Josef Korbel is the father of Rice's predecessor in the State Department, Madeleine Albright.

abandon the region.¹⁸ In this letter the authors expressed their fear concerning anti-Semitism and Russia. There was no official response from the White House.

In September 2009, based on a review and intelligence information, President Obama decided to cancel the missile shield project in the Czech Republic and Poland.¹⁹ This abandonment was controversial, both in its form and substance. The administration had previously lobbied for a different anti-missile system that would be more efficient against the then highly feasible Iranian nuclear weapons program.²⁰ This decision was not received well, either by the Czechs or the Poles, both of whom reproached the Obama administration for abandoning a program that had been negotiated for years. Given that critics of the missile defense system had argued that it would pointlessly provoke Russia, the response from Moscow to the program's withdrawal was lukewarm. Nevertheless, the Kremlin did not hide its appreciation.²¹ In part, Obama's withdrawing from the deal was a step in the direction of his "Reset" policy with Russia, which had begun as a good idea – however, the cheers were later proven to be premature.²²

Vice President Joe Biden addressed the criticism directed at the Obama administration for abandoning the region. During a visit to Romania, he said that it was "because of our global responsibilities and your growing capacity and willingness to meet them with us that we value our partnership with Central Europe and Europe now more than we ever had."²³ This assurance of US commitment was not sufficient for some. All the V4 countries "rested on their laurels,"²⁴ tranquil in the notion that they were covered by the NATO (US) umbrella of safety and security. At the very time when Vice President Biden spoke of the region's willingness and capacity, these countries were steadily (with the exception of Poland) lowering their defense spending and thus lowering their capacities for commitment to the common goal of a secure region.²⁵

One of the obstacles of cooperation between the V4 and the United States is the latter's gradually declining favorability within the V4 region. While the steering wheel of US foreign policy is slowly but surely turning towards other regions, particularly Asia, some representatives in Europe have called for a stronger US presence. The United States sees its role in Europe

¹⁸ "Zostań z nami, Ameryko," [Stay with us, America], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 18, 2009. Available online: http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/1,133483,6834746,Zostan_z_nami__Ameryko.html (accessed on September 4, 2015).

¹⁹ "Obama abandons missile defence shield in Europe," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2009. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/17/missile-defence-shield-barack-obama> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

²⁰ T. Daborowski, A. Wilk, "Missile shield in central Europe becoming a reality," OSW, October 30, 2013. Available online: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-10-30/missile-shield-central-europe-becoming-a-reality> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

²¹ L. Harding, I. Traynor, "Obama abandons missile defence shield in Europe," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2009. Available online: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/17/missile-defence-shield-barack-obama> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

²² S. Schuster, "A failed Russia 'reset' haunts Obama in Europe," *TIME*, June 3, 2014. Available online: <http://time.com/2819889/obama-russia-europe-poland/> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

²³ "Remarks by Vice President Biden on America Central Europe and a Partnership for the 21st century," White House, October 22, 2009. Available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-vice-president-biden-america-central-europe-and-a-partnership-21st-century> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

²⁴ D. Fischer, "NATO – ten years after," *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* Vol. XXIII, No. 1–2, 2014, pp. 90–101.

²⁵ J. Kufčák, "The V4 countries and the impacts of the austerity cuts on their defense spending and armed forces," *Obrana a strategie* Vol. 14, No. 2, 2014, pp. 35–48.

differently. After 65 years of strong transatlantic links codified in NATO, America is shifting its focus elsewhere, to regions that are more vital, and that simultaneously offer opportunities and pose threats. Consequently, this shift in foreign policy is reflected in the polls. According to the US Global Leadership Report of 2013, 38 per cent of Hungarians see the US global role positively, with one fifth of responders seeing it negatively. In the Czech Republic, the ratio is 39 per cent to 29 per cent. Poland and Slovakia are at the bottom of the pile, even though Poland is often considered the US's most trusted and reliable ally in the region. Their responders claimed 36 per cent and 27 per cent favorability respectively. However, it is important first to critically assess the question that was being asked. It concerned US global leadership, so the negative numbers may just reflect the number of people who would simply like to see a stronger US presence in Europe.

Opportunities in cooperation

Close and comprehensive cooperation between the V4 countries should be the foremost priority of the region. Although critics claim that such cooperation is not effectual,²⁶ it is still important, and experience in the Western Balkans has proved some of the critics wrong.²⁷ Given the region's common history and the similarities between some of the countries (e.g. culture and language), the countries and their people benefit from such cooperation, when it is based on a sharing of the burden of the costs of strategic projects.

There are quite a few opportunities for the future. First, in terms of defense and security cooperation, the mission of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) is important. The mission as such ended in 2014, and the soldiers headed back to their home countries, where their lives were now much different from the time before they joined the mission. They now had had the chance to cooperate and work together with partners from different countries, and not only from Europe: they had gained experience working with more than 50 countries acting as allies and partners during the thirteen years of the ISAF mission. This experience can now be used at home. First of all, it can serve as a platform of cooperation within the V4 countries, which could later be enlarged into a cooperation that is more firm. Men and women in uniform from all V4 countries have worked with soldiers from different and more militarily advanced countries. The ISAF mission is now being followed by a new mission, Resolute Support, which is supposed to focus mainly on military training and support. It is obvious now, however, that the objectives of this mission will go beyond the preliminarily agreed terms and conditions. There cannot be a mission that is strictly limited to the battlefield, as in Afghanistan. All V4 countries have pledged to offer their support.²⁸ They will be involved in the mission. This is a chance for them to work together.

The second opportunity is related to the distinction between common and individual threats. One of the common threats that the V4 faces today is that of cyber warfare, which is regarded as an unconventional threat. All countries, small and large, see the cyber world as offering

²⁶ E. Hindu, "Can a few common goals move Visegrad cooperation forward?," *Visegrad Insight*, January 5, 2015. Available online: <http://visegradinsight.eu/the-ugly-truth-of-project-v405012015/> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

²⁷ "European integration of the Western Balkans: can the Visegrad Group countries be a role model?," *European movement*, May 7, 2015. Available online: <http://europeanmovement.eu/event/european-integration-of-the-western-balkans-can-the-visegrad-group-countries-be-a-role-model/> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

²⁸ "Resolute support mission: troop contributing nations." NATO, February 26, 2015. Available online: <http://www.rs.nato.int/images/media/PDFs/150501placemat.pdf> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

great potential and opportunity, and as posing a grave threat at the same time. The reason for this is that, with only a weak system of protection, a small country is as good a target as a big one. Furthermore, small countries may serve as "practice areas" where potential terrorists may rehearse their attacks before hitting a bigger country.

Elements of cooperation

The V4 is not *sui generis*; there are a number of other regional cooperation groups in the world as well. One of them is NORDEFECO, the defense cooperation between the four Nordic countries – Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Norway. In the past this served as one of the inspirational points for the V4. Interestingly, the NORDEFECO group faces similar obstacles in their cooperation to those that the V4 struggles with.

There are three important elements in defense cooperation – procurement, information, and education. It all comes down to the political willingness of the countries involved. Common procurement is one way to lower financial costs and deepen cooperation between countries. However, all such projects that were developed so far have failed. One of the reasons for this is that it takes a few years of meetings and striking deals before the procurement even begins. Then it takes a few years more to fulfill the criteria and find a reliable source of goods and services. During this long period there might be a couple of changes in government, with new ministers of defense. Pre-agreed deals are often pulled out of the discussion.

The second element to be discussed is information. A common procurement must be built on trust. There is no way to reach common ground, to find a solution to common problems, or to purchase equipment, without a certain trust between the partners involved. Unfortunately, the trust existing between partners in the context of defense and security is often foggy, and according to some representatives of V4 countries, is gradually fading away. Despite the high number of public announcements and photo ops of ministers and heads of states, analysts from the respective ministries are often not aware of their counterpart's business. It is not necessary to release the national strategy on security or defense, which would put any country in danger, but to gain trust partners should at least be aware of the next steps to be taken in terms of purchasing military equipment.

The third element is education. There are much respected military educational systems in V4 countries, including military academies such as the Armed Forces Academy of Milan Rastislav Štefánik in Liptovský Mikuláš, the Tadeusz Kościuszko Land Forces Military Academy in Wrocław, and the Military Academy at Vyškov. These academies and institutions should work closer with each other, and support international exchange programs for both young cadets and officers. This would help future military leaders to adopt the mindset of regional cooperation at the earliest stages of their military education, training, and exercise.

V4 Battlegroup

It may seem that the V4 group lost its purpose and agenda after 2004, when the long term commitment of political elites to transatlantic integration came to an end. However, for the past ten years the V4 group has endeavored to find a place for itself in terms of a common foreign and defense policy. Some may argue that this was not the original purpose of cooperation.

Granted, but new developments in the international security milieu call for different purposes of cooperation, even among V4 countries.

In 2011, strategist George Friedman optimistically spoke of the V4 region as a "New European Military Force." He argued for a stronger military presence in the region, which would thus make the region into a checkpoint for American forces.²⁹ Today this idea would most probably hit the thick wall of political will and public disapproval. It is not, however, something that is off the table. After the Russian invasion of Crimea and the shaky response from the region, combined with the quiet propaganda being conducted within the V4, the plan to deploy Special Forces and counterterrorist professionals in the region is on the mind of rational thinkers.

The flagship project of Visegrad cooperation in defense and security is the V4 Battlegroup. The first proposal for a common battlegroup saw the light of the day in 2011, when it was announced by Polish Minister of Defense Bogdan Klich at the V4 meeting on defense in Levoča, Slovakia. This meeting was attended also by Ukrainian Minister of Defense Mykhailo Yezhel.³⁰ Although the V4 Battlegroup is one of the EU Battlegroups, it aims at conducting its exercises in closer cooperation with NATO's Response Force (NRF), which was put in place during and after the 2002 NATO Prague Summit,³¹ and later upgraded to a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) at the 2014 Wales Summit.³²

One of the steps taken by countries in connection with the Russian intervention in Ukraine was to invite Ukraine to be a part of the V4 BG.³³ The further actions taken by Russia in eastern Ukraine, and its prolonged cyber or hybrid warfare conducted in the Baltic region and other parts of Europe, have pushed V4 countries to consider upgrading the V4 BG to a permanent force. As argued by Milan Šuplata³⁴ and later concurred by the V4 prime ministers,³⁵ the unstable situation in Europe dramatically changes the calculus.

The V4 BG should benefit from the experience of the Czech-Slovak Battlegroup which was active in the second half of 2009.³⁶

²⁹ G. Friedman, "Visegrad: A New European Military Force," *STRATFOR*, May 17, 2011. Available online: <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110516-visegrad-new-european-military-force> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³⁰ "Z kroniky mesta Levoča," *Levoča.sk*, March 17, 2014. Available online: <http://www.levoca.sk/vyznamne-udalosti.phtml?id5=11788> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³¹ "The NATO Response Force," *The Loyal Mariner*. Available online: <http://forsvaret.dk/loyalmariner05/eng/nrf/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³² "NATO. Defence Ministers agree to strengthen NATO's defences, establish Spearhead Force, 05 Feb. 2015." Available online: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_117188.htm (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³³ "V4 invites Ukraine to set up joint military unit," *UkrinForm*, June 4, 2014. Available online: http://www.ukrinform.ua/eng/news/v4_invites_ukraine_to_set_up_joint_military_unit_322379 (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³⁴ M. Šuplata, "The Visegrad Battlegroup: building new capabilities for the region," CEPI, 2013. Available online: http://www.cepolicy.org/sites/cepolicy.org/files/attachments/pb5_preview.pdf (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³⁵ "Visegrad countries may turn EU Battlegroup into permanent V4 Rapid Reaction Force," *Atlantic Council*, July 3, 2014. Available online: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/visegrad-countries-may-turn-eu-battlegroup-into-permanent-v4-rapid-reaction-force> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³⁶ "The joint exercise of the Czech-Slovak EU Battle Battlegroup, named Collective Shield 2009 (CS 09), is culminating," *eu2009.cz*, August 16, 2011. Available online: <http://www.eu2009.cz/en/news-and-documents/press-releases/members-of-the-eu-military-committee-at-the-collective-shiel-14760/index.html> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

What should the next American president do?

The American presidential elections will be held in November 2016 and the V4 will most definitely not be at the centre of attention during the campaign debates. However, more than anywhere in recent years, foreign policy towards the V4 region will be discussed vigorously. There are a number of areas in which V4 countries can and should help the United States in their efforts. First, the fight against radical terrorism will have to include more countries. Fortunately, the V4 group has not seen an attack on its soil from violent extremist groups like Islamic State, but this should not be a calming factor.

The Visegrad countries should continue their commitment to the North Atlantic and Transatlantic peacekeeping missions and military operations. There are discrepancies within the group as to how strong the United States is perceived as a partner. It is no secret that Poland and Slovakia both have stronger transatlantic links than Hungary or the Czech Republic. Mainly through their official representatives (in Slovakia's case, its president Andrej Kiska), they are lining up with its transatlantic partner. This should not, however, be an incentive to divide or split the V4 group. The many existing levels and areas of cooperation ensure that their comprehensive cooperation will continue in the future.

The decision to place the next Alliance summit in Poland³⁷ is a great achievement and should not go to waste. It is not only a symbolic gesture by the Alliance to show its commitment to Central and Eastern Europe, but also a great opportunity for Poland to re-establish its position as one of the most reliable NATO allies.³⁸ Furthermore, there is a great opportunity for the V4 group to create a common footprint within the Alliance. One year may seem like a long time; however, decisions should be taken by the V4 leaders as soon as possible to develop a common strategy which would serve as a blueprint for future cooperation. The summit decision is a token of assurance from the allies, and an example of how the future US administration can prove its commitment to the region. It is also proof of the continuation of NATO's Open Door Policy, which includes an active and positive call for the further enlargement of the Alliance. This policy is carried out by all V4 members. In June, Polish defense minister Tomasz Siemoniak expressed his wish for the Warsaw Summit: to propose an invitation for Macedonia³⁹ and Montenegro to join NATO.

Conclusion

History will judge the V4 project as successful, and rightly so. Euro-Atlantic integration would have been much slower without this close cooperation at various levels. Slovakia's integration into NATO would have been nothing without the help and experience provided by its three "older sisters," already members by 1999, five years earlier. Nevertheless, there is the common notion that the V4 platform lost its purpose after 2004. If not purpose, it certainly lost its driving mechanism of NATO integration. Now, however, there is a different mechanism, which is the security of borders and of the people living within those borders.

³⁷ "NATO Secretary General announces dates for 2016 Warsaw Summit," *NATO*, May 22, 2015. Available online: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_120085.htm (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³⁸ B. Lété, "The next NATO Summit 2016 offers Poland opportunities worth seizing," *The German Marshall Fund*, October 29, 2014. Available online: <http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2014/10/29/next-nato-summit-2016-offers-poland-opportunities-worth-seizing> (accessed on September 4, 2015).

³⁹ In NATO, the Republic of Macedonia is recognized as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).

The current state of the V4–US relationship is neither the end of a “Beautiful Friendship,” as suggested by Kalan,⁴⁰ nor is it a flawless relationship with no necessary improvements. It is a strategic and pragmatic partnership in which the importance of all actors involved in the relationship is high. The United States should stay committed to the region. The Visegrad Group forms the perfect link for the United States between its interest in Western Europe and in those countries of Eastern Europe which are not yet part of the European Union or NATO – including the countries of the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Russia. However, the countries of the V4 must be able to face their own problems, and to admit that they are not at the core of US priorities as of now. This position most certainly can change. But it will take hard work and effort on both sides, if they are willing. Nevertheless, it is each state's own borders and people that must be protected first, before reaching out for any international cooperation.

⁴⁰ D. Kalan, “The end of a ‘beautiful friendship?’ U.S. relations with the Visegrad countries under Barack Obama (2009–2013),” *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* Vol. 21, No.4, Autumn 2012, p. 83.