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The Central European playground:

Who plays what?

By Xymena Kurowska and Bence Németh

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Historically Central Europe has been the playground of the ‘big guys of world politics’ – the Great Powers. It was the region where two World Wars broke out in the first half of the twentieth century and where hundreds of thousands of soldiers lined up on both sides of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. The disintegration of the Warsaw Pact did not seem to change this pattern. For many observers, the region continues as an object rather than subject of strategic games in which the usual suspects, the big powers, determine the stakes and trajectories.

This picture fails to capture today’s realities in Central Europe which witnesses robust cooperation initiatives in defence issues. Fine-tuned to regional conditions and thus highly pragmatic in scope, the lively politics of defence affairs show the Central European countries as keen to shape the games on their own playground. Two recent projects stand out in this context: the agreement on the creation of the Visegrad Battlegroup and the emerging Central European Defence Cooperation. With partly overlapping memberships, and with the former more institutionalised than the latter, these frameworks demonstrate a variable geometry of regional and extra-regional constellations of actors. The most active players from inside the Central European playground are Poland, Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Entrepreneurial as they are, they act under the watchful eye of two ‘caretaker’ institutions of the Central European playground – the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union – that still set the overall defence agendas, and in the active presence of two external shapers – the United States and Italy – which promote their own stakes in the Central European game.

1. What to play?

The early cooperation between the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland in the framework of the Visegrad Group – or Visegrad Four (V4) – was initiated in 1991. The V4 format had proved transformative especially in the run-up to the enlargements of the Atlantic Alliance and European Union as a teaching laboratory on a micro-scale, to oust Soviet thinking from the region and to collectively prepare its participation in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Although significant progress was not initially achieved among the V4 countries in the field of defence, in May 2011 the four states agreed to establish a European Union Battlegroup – expected to become operational and be on standby in the first half of 2016. The role of the leading nation of the Visegrad Battlegroup is undertaken by Poland.

Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC), with the participation of Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia, had its first defence ministerial meeting in June 2012 in Frauenkirchen, Austria. Yet the framework had been consolidating in this format since early January 2011 when its Defence Policy Directors (DPDs) met on the margin of the informal European Union DPD meeting in Budapest. They agreed on mapping the possible areas for cooperation on capability development and on the coordination of their standpoints regarding different defence policy and planning issues. They also decided to eschew the creation of costly bureaucratic structures in favour of cooperation that was as flexible as possible. This does not denote a lack of method. An extended survey of possible areas of cooperation resulted in several countries taking up the role of the lead nation and procuring ‘food for thought’ papers that lay out the rationale and modalities of a number of projects. In the spirit of pragmatism reflecting the regional perspective, the principle remains to proceed *a la carte*, i.e. the six participating nations are encouraged to forge ties with each other through different arrangements, including bilaterally and trilaterally. While the six DPDs met several times on the margin of European Union, Atlantic Alliance and V4 meetings during 2011 and 2012, expert level workshops regarding earmarked areas of cooperation have taken place more frequently, further illustrating the operational logic that underpins the cooperation. Its first results include the joint training of Czech, Croatian and Hungarian Air Mentor Teams for the ISAF mission; strengthened Austrian-Hungarian cooperation within the EUFOR ALTHEA mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina; and collaboration on weapons of mass destruction defence.

2. Who is playing?

Poland: an anxious participant observer

The biggest country in Central Europe and the lead nation of the Visegrad Battlegroup, Poland seems less enthusiastic about Central European regional cooperation. It dragged its feet before committing to the role of the leading nation and opted for the observer status in CEDC despite the invitation to be a founding member. While its gaze is on what it sees as a bigger prize commensurate with its perceived importance in European security, Warsaw oscillates between an observer and a cautious participant in CEDC. Its strategic interests are tied with bigger military powers in Europe – in particular Germany and France in the form of ‘Weimar’ cooperation – and it remains traditionally pro-American, having committed to a substantive fleet of F-16s. Yet it is anxious to keep its fingers on Central European affairs. It sees itself as a regional leader and possibly the region’s advocate in Brussels where, as some maintain, there emerges something of a ‘Central European reflex’ for cooperation in the daily dealings of Brussels politics.

Insiders: Austria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic

While Poland prefers to play with the big powers more than with the regional actors of Central Europe, Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic have been very active in regional initiatives. Not a member of the V4, Austria has stood out as one of the driving forces behind the CEDC. Its rationale is multifaceted. It seeks to revive the thwarted efforts from the 1990s to create a Central European peacekeeping pool under its aegis. The latter was cut short by the success of the ‘Partnership for Peace’ framework which instilled the Atlanticist version of shifting from territorial defence to expeditionary missions. Yet the non-Atlantic Alliance model of peacekeeping and the Nordic example of cooperation in the European Union’s Common Security and Defence Policy operations remain for Austria an ideal worth striving for to consolidate the region in strategic terms. The kicking-off and a gradual institutionalisation of CEDC would serve this purpose, also indirectly bringing in the ‘know-how’ of the Atlantic Alliance’s ‘smart defence’ through the input of the regional members. The framing of the regional cooperation as response to the European Union’s calls for ‘pooling and sharing’ has been a convenient scheme in this respect, a window of opportunity to reformulate politico-military agendas.

Austria has found a keen partner in Hungary for this endeavour. The context of the Hungarian Presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2011 saw the first concrete

steps towards articulating possible scenarios of CEDC. The informal institutionalisation of the CEDC was initiated by the Hungarian DPD. On his invitation, a seminar in Budapest in October 2010 gathered a broader group of countries potentially interested in discussing future cooperation on the margin of the European Union's DPD meeting in Budapest in January 2011. High on the agenda of this first meeting was the question of cooperation on regional air policing, potentially an area of significant savings for every participating Central European state struggling to procure and maintain modern fighter jets on its own. Hungary, whose lease of the JAS-39 Gripen fleet consumes the bulk of its shrinking budget available for defence capability development, is a good case in point. The issue of regional air policy proved too complex to agree on immediately, however. The DPDs decided instead to proceed by smaller steps, to build confidence and gain public support for cooperation first.

The strategy of the Czech Republic seems to be to utilise CEDC to boost military capabilities for the Atlantic Alliance's projects and operations, which potentially clashes with Austria's non-membership of the alliance. Czechs underwent a deep structural reform through Partnership for Peace which left them with a distinct 'Atlantic Alliance reflex', including as regards scenarios for preparing expeditionary forces. The Czech presidency of CEDC in the second half of 2011 and early 2012 was a clear indicator of this pattern, with Prague suggesting cooperation for defending against weapons of mass destruction and multinational logistics to respond to the Atlantic Alliance's needs, and also initiated the joint training of the common Czech-Croat Air Mentor Team together with Hungarians for the ISAF mission.

Caretakers: The Atlantic Alliance and the European Union

The initiatives of Central Europeans do not unfold in a vacuum. The Atlantic Alliance and the European Union still set the overall agenda and the basic rules of the regional games, without however determining their substance. Most of the areas of cooperation in CEDC are streamlined through the European Union's 'Ghent Process' of pooling and sharing, politically an occasion to develop commonalities in strategic cultures of the Member States, and the Atlantic Alliance's long-standing but recently revamped 'Smart Defence' initiative. Most of the cooperation reflects the needs of the Atlantic Alliance. But with the Visegrad Battlegroup, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia intend to contribute to the European Union's rapid response capability. The enhanced Hungarian-Austrian cooperation for the EUFOR ALTHEA operation in the framework of CEDC also serves the European cause. The caretakers are thus useful facilitators for developing closer operational ties in the region.

Outsiders: Italy and the United States

Italy is not sensu stricte a Central European country but it has traditionally been involved in managing the region. Recently, it took up the airpolicing tasks of Slovenia's airspace – as Slovenia does not possess appropriate aircrafts for it – and although it never yet intervened it is legally authorised to do so. More pertinently, Italy has been active in a highly successful Multinational Land Force – a trilateral brigade of Hungary, Italy and Slovenia – and an initiative which it is keen to use as a base for expanding its activities in the region.

The United States takes on coordination in a less conspicuous and more pragmatic way. With its gaze on the Pacific and the growing conviction that in the long run European military affairs need to be left to the Europeans, Washington has developed a two-fold pattern of encouraging cooperation. It certainly supports anything which contributes to the global burden-sharing in security and is eager to help at the operational level, especially through equipment and training of special and expeditionary forces, which would allow Central Europeans to jump in on the interventionist bandwagon. Further, it remains committed to lobbying for the purchase of F-16 fighter jets which is an option for impoverished budgets of Central European states whose MIGs have decomposed by now.

3. Games of the future

In the coming years, the Visegrad Battlegroup and CEDC are likely to determine the shape of defence cooperation on the Central European playground. However, the future of Visegrad defence cooperation after providing the Battlegroup for six months in 2016 has not yet been decided. In the long run, it is uncertain whether CEDC is here to stay, or even institutionalise in any form for an extended period. The usual predicaments call for taming the enthusiasm, but these two initiatives bring out distinct trends which are less expected to fade away. They have left their imprint already and are likely to resurface in strategic and political reshufflings in the Central European playground.

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The views expressed in this paper are their own, and do not represent the official view of any government, in particular the Hungarian Ministry of Defence.