



WEAPONIZING

Subregional Cooperation

The case for Central European solidarity

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Meaningful subregional cooperation in Central Europe has been triggered by the security concerns surviving in the area since the end of the Cold War. Although often encouraged from the outside, subregional cooperation in Central Europe has been acknowledged by countries involved as a necessity and turned into a geopolitical “weapon” or an instrument of “realpolitik” in their struggle for relevance and influence.

Its value stems from the capacity to efficiently prevent, deter and counter future hybrid subconventional security challenges and threats

coming primarily from the East, but also from the possibility to be used as a force multiplier, for promoting a positive subregional agenda in terms of connectivity, digitalization, sustainable development or growth. Central Europe has received growing attention from great powers (the United States, Germany, Russia and China) motivated by security and/or economic interests. In this context, Central European subregional cooperation could strengthen the sense of “en marche” solidarity, forging new ways of interaction to the benefit of the region’s strategic resilience inside the Euro-Atlantic community.

Security along the eastern flank

The current security situation along NATO's eastern flank is precarious. Multifaceted security challenges coexist and reinforce each other against the background of prolonged political instability in Europe's eastern (and southern) neighborhood, pending issues on the trans-Atlantic agenda, international turbulences caused by a global redistribution of power, influence and resources, and a looming crisis of confidence in multilateralism as currently known. The most evident and threatening are the illegal Russian occupation of Crimea, Moscow's military aggressiveness in the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, the crisis in eastern Ukraine (Donbas), the likelihood of hybrid-war operations such as cyber attacks and renewed uncertainties or controversies related to energy supply. Energy blackmail, hostile subconventional military activity and cyber risks make for a highly dangerous cocktail of negative security trends along NATO's eastern border, with the potential for escalation.

The dominant issue on the regional energy agenda is the controversy over Nord Stream 2, a Baltic Sea natural gas pipeline that will connect Russia to Germany, circumventing Central Europe, and in particular, Ukraine. The main concern is the likelihood of it being used as part of a broader strategy to consolidate Russia's dominating position on the European gas market. Despite the adoption of an amendment to the Gas Directive during the Romanian presidency of the Council of the European Union (January-July 2019), which clarified the EU's approach on the issue, recent developments indicate that Nord Stream 2 has turned into one of the most controversial topics on the trans-Atlantic agenda. Central Europe, given its dependence on Russian gas, has the most to lose from a gas war involving Russia, the U.S. and the EU.

The situation on the cyber front in Central Europe is fragile and prone to further deterioration if decisive preventive measures are not taken. According to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, "cyber attacks are becoming more frequent, more complex and more destructive. From low-level attempts to technologically sophisticated attacks. They come from states and nonstate actors. From close to home and from very far away. And they affect each and every one of us." According to the European Council on Foreign Relations: "Cyber threats have increasingly moved beyond financial theft, cyber criminality, and intelligence collection into much more aggressive actions designed to shape national debates, referendums and elections in European countries. According to a Europol analysis, "Europe's increased vulnerability to hybrid attacks is not a risk inherent in technological progress and globalization: It is a matter of choice. Europe has settled on a laissez-faire approach to these issues." Things have become even more complicated because of China's problematic stance on cyber security.

Russia's aggression toward Central Europe and NATO's eastern flank has its roots in pre-Vladimir Putin policy. According to published reports, intensified military exercises and buildups in Crimea and Kaliningrad, including anti-access/area denial capabilities and nuclear-capable missiles, are only the latest episodes in a series of actions directed against NATO and its eastern flank members. The common view is that Russia started a neo-imperial policy toward former Soviet states and beyond after Putin's statement that the Soviet Union's demise was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. In reality, according to Estonian politician Marko Mihkelson, this happened immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) when the Kremlin "started taking back the old empire, calling it consolidation of the Russian world. The concept of near abroad was quickly introduced to separate the former empire from the rest of the world." A set of policies and enterprises aimed at regaining



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Russian President Vladimir Putin watches a navy exercise from the Marshal Ustinov missile cruiser in the Black Sea off the coast of Crimea in January 2020.

its great power status, its international prestige and influence, was introduced. This included the creation of frozen conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, constantly opposing NATO enlargement and an anti-West posture during the war in the former Yugoslavia, including the Kosovo crisis. There are reasons to believe that all of these steps were, in fact, part of a grand strategy, having at its core tactical hybrid harassment of or subconventional attrition warfare with Western powers and Western structures, until new geopolitical circumstances and the evolution of Russia itself would enable a more assertive Russian strategy in Europe and beyond. In a Cold War logic of confrontation, that would not exclude strategic encirclement of NATO's eastern flank.



Insecurity along NATO's eastern front is indeed induced by, but not necessarily limited to, Russia and its policies. Since the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008, when allies could not agree to offer Ukraine and Georgia the Membership Action Plan (MAP), it seems that the West has lost the strategic initiative. Since then, NATO and the EU have only reacted to actions staged by external players or to unexpected evolutions of difficult-to-contain crises in its proximity (Georgia in 2008, Libya in 2011, Syria in 2011, Ukraine in 2014). As Sebastian Sprenger of Defense News noted, the authors of 2019's "Munich Security Report" described a sense of "Westlessness" paralyzing the trans-Atlantic community. In this context, geopolitical adventures and adventurists proliferated, making room for strategic-disorder seekers and/or status-quo contesters to advance toward Central Europe, especially from the south and the east. After a long period when the West had set the agenda in the region and international law was observed, in a matter of less than five years, everything, including illegal occupation of foreign territories and unpunished or unopposed military aggression, was again possible without anybody being held responsible.

The financial crisis, Brexit, the migrant crisis and the subsequent offensive of populism in some EU countries, combined with the halt of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans that was seen by many as a strategic mistake, fueled a sense of insecurity in Central and Eastern Europe. Under these circumstances, in some Central European capitals, doubts were expressed about whether European and Euro-Atlantic solidarity will pass the stress test. It raised the question of what will happen should a new, deeper crisis

A Russian passenger train crosses a bridge linking Russia and the Crimean Peninsula in 2019, a trip that Ukrainian officials said illegally carried people across the Ukrainian border. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

emerge. In the words of British author Nick Cohen: "Today, Eastern European nations are again surrounded by threats, from Russian adventurism in the east to sublimation under EU policies in the west."

Thus, front-line states have understood that, despite differences and inequalities, despite divergent interests and sensitivities, they must join means and ensure the promotion of a common, positive agenda. Moreover, they ought to prove that they are ready to cooperate like never before for the common good. In fact, Central European states should be expected to commit and take risks for the sake of the values they have been sharing in pursuit of their vision.

Meaningful subregional cooperation

The V4: Since the collapse of communist regimes in Central Europe, former Soviet satellite states have developed meaningful forms/formats of subregional cooperation using security as a central trigger or motivating factor. The Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia), launched in 1991, was the first. It was one of the most coherent attempts by countries in post-1989 Central Europe to create a flexible, noninstitutionalized framework for interaction between governments that included dialogue about issues of mutual interest. In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Central Europe,

security remained a key element in discussions about Poland's, Hungary's and the Czech Republic's political futures in Europe. According to Polish author Jacek Więclawski, "the factor of the external threat was fundamental to the effectiveness of the Visegrád cooperation at its initial phase. Hence, the perspective to join NATO and the European Union was not only the aim of the transformation, but also the escape from the 'grey zone' of security between the falling USSR and the West."

“Today, Eastern European nations are again surrounded by threats, from Russian adventurism in the east to sublimation under EU policies in the west.”

of state for European and Eurasian affairs. The newly constituted group, informally labeled V10, made a valid contribution to a broader dialogue on security by incorporating ideas and perceptions developed by 10 new members of NATO soon after their integration into the Alliance. U.S. participation was pivotal because it made clear to all new NATO members what Washington saw as priorities of the common security agenda and how common objectives, from

energy security to stabilization or fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq, could be achieved.

Although they took place before Russia's aggression in Georgia and long before the illegal annexation of Crimea, these discussions revealed a commonality of views between the U.S. and allies that were part of what was later to

be called NATO's eastern flank. It made participants realize that an intensified dialogue in such a format would make sense because it would allow for a common understanding of security challenges in NATO's eastern neighborhood and the Western Balkans. On the other hand, it was only natural for Central European countries to have a strategic dialogue with an ally that had the political will and military means to intervene decisively, if necessary, in a regional crisis that could affect NATO.

This approach proved useful 10 years later, in the wake of the NATO Warsaw summit, where NATO heads of state or government agreed to establish an enhanced presence in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to "demonstrate as part of our overall posture, allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate Allied response to any aggression," as a Warsaw summit communique put it. Judy Dempsey, a nonresident senior fellow at Carnegie Europe, observed that, contrary to Germany, France and Italy, who argued that NATO's Article 5 would discourage Moscow from attacking Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, "the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Central European states counter that defense guarantees without the necessary forces, plans, and presence deter no one. This group has succeeded in pushing through the upgrades in the defense of the Eastern flank." The outcome of the Warsaw summit was remarkable. The enhanced forward presence has become an undeniable reality and NATO's defense posture has been reinforced ever since, from Estonia to the north to Romania and Bulgaria to the south, with a special emphasis on the Black Sea.

It seems that the B9 has been reasonably successful so far in approaching regional security, particularly against the background of evolutions in Europe's eastern vicinity. It achieved a certain degree of geopolitical significance, in the context of NATO's adaptation to a changing security paradigm, but has not yet reached a necessary level of visibility and its scope does not yet include any EU-related security issues, although all B9 countries belong to both NATO and the EU.

But for various reasons, the Visegrád group (which became known as the V4 after Czechoslovakia separated into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993) was unsuccessful in assembling an actionable common security agenda for more than two decades. It was not until recently that the V4 countries managed to approach security issues collectively. The first successful step in this direction came in 2010, when V4 countries signed a memorandum on air force training cooperation. Soon afterward, defense ministers of the V4 countries decided to establish a battlegroup led by Poland. In 2011, an intriguing new idea was flagged since it made a clear connection between the U.S. presence in Europe, the NATO Strategic Concept and regional groups. In essence, a Stratfor analysis noted: "For all V4 countries, a coherent Europe-wide security alliance anchored by a strong U.S. presence is preferable to any regional grouping. But the latest NATO Strategic Concept, created at the end of 2010, shows an alliance lacking in coherence. For the V4, the main problem with NATO is that not all European states share their level of concern regarding Russian intentions on their Eastern borders. Breaking off into regionally focused security groups with common security interests therefore makes sense." Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea changed the paradigm in terms of how the eastern flank was approached by the Central European allies and by NATO as a whole. It made clear that subregional security cooperation in Central Europe could make a difference in successfully bringing up the issue of NATO's eastern border. The aim was to build and hold the political consensus that the eastern flank has to be defended.

The B9: The Bucharest Format, or the B9, which launched in 2015, was not the first attempt by the new NATO allies to gather and discuss security matters. Political directors from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia had met in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2005, where they were joined by the U.S. principal deputy assistant secretary

The 3SI: The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), launched in 2015, aims to bring subregional cooperation in Central Europe to a higher level of complexity and sophistication. It was deemed to be a game changer by setting a new level of ambition in regional cooperation in terms of scope, resources and outcomes. By simply focusing on infrastructure, connectivity and energy, 3SI intended to extend the regional cooperation agenda. Projects in these fields have been funded through EU mechanisms precisely because of their complexity and high costs.

3SI tried to bring added value in its focus on the North-South corridor, given that most railway and highway connections had been designed as East-West “bridges,” linking Central and Eastern Europe to the West, as part of the Trans-European Transport Network and subsequent European corridors. Yet, less can be said of the rail-to-sea connection between Baltic Sea ports in Poland or Lithuania and the Adriatic and Black Sea points of entry for non-European goods, including energy, especially liquified natural gas. According to the Bucharest Summit Joint Declaration in 2018, 3SI was developed to fix that by ambitiously designing projects in three areas: communications, energy and transport. By introducing an economic dimension, “the Three Seas Initiative came as a welcome addition to the B9 security-centered format, further expanding regional cooperation and integrating it with EU policy and strategy,” wrote Oana Popescu, director of the GlobalFocus think tank, in the *Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*. After an ambitious start, the initiative started facing difficulties and opposition. Some voices claimed the 3SI had the potential to jeopardize EU unity and cohesion, when unity and cohesion were already being questioned in many EU capitals by populists and nationalists. Others interpreted 3SI as a “Plan B” with regard to the EU or as a rival to German activities.

The 3SI summit in Bucharest in September 2018, attended by the European Commission president and the German foreign minister, proved that the initiative is fully compatible with the European project and that it has no hidden (anti-German) agenda. Moreover, by delivering a list of 3SI projects eligible for funding through the 3SI Fund financial instrument, the meeting in Bucharest went far beyond declarations of intent, unfulfilled expectations and unrealistic ambitions. It promised a results-oriented approach and encouraged sectorial cooperation, acknowledging in a joint declaration, “the critical role of the private sector and financial institutions in ensuring the success of the goals of the 3SI.” In the end, the summit broadened the political traction of the initiative: Not only German and American officials attended, but other states (Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia) were represented, presenting 3SI as inclusive and open. Additionally, a business forum was organized and a network of national chambers of commerce was established, engaging the private sector in a coordinated manner. Notably, the summit in Bucharest was attended by financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank. In this way, 3SI achieved political and economic results.

Conclusions: capabilities, proximity, attitude

Central Europe has turned into a regional conglomerate of states that, while strongly and irrevocably embedded in the Euro-Atlantic community of values and institutions, has developed a certain geopolitical identity and a geostrategic relevance of its own. Frequent and various interactions at multiple levels have brought people and institutions together. It has opened up new, unexplored channels of communication among leaders and practitioners, between business people and public authorities from countries with different institutional or political cultures. In short, it created the sentiment of belonging to a community where cooperation is possible, desirable and profitable and, moreover, where participants are genuinely comfortable with each other because they are equal stakeholders in the expected outcome of their work. Communities of purpose and interoperability have been easier to achieve, and cooperation seems to have prevailed over competition.

Accounting for 100 million inhabitants (one-fifth of the EU’s total population), Central Europe is thriving. With an average annual growth rate of more than 3% for almost a decade, the region has been the beneficiary of a strong increase of foreign direct investment since the early 1990s, has received a significant amount of EU funds, and hosts regional headquarters and offices of several multinationals, according to studies by Intereconomics and the EU’s statistical office. With a contribution of more than 8% to the EU’s gross domestic product, Central Europe is already a voice on key EU foreign policy subjects, such as those pertaining to the Black Sea and the Western Balkans, but also on energy and cohesion policy. Many EU projects, such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the Black Sea Synergy or the Danube Strategy, refer to or originated from Central Europe. Their cumulated output and outcomes have shaped the EU agenda and introduced new ideas into the debate over the future of the European project and the EU’s role as a global player, including its relationships with Russia and China. Central European countries such as Romania and Poland are pivotal for ambitious EU projects under the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) policy and have constantly advocated for deeper NATO-EU cooperation.

Regional cooperation has added value to already existing Central European credentials in the area of foreign policy, security and defense. Central Europe will be an inseparable part of any meaningful cooperation initiatives in the EU’s eastern and southern vicinity, given its strong voice in favor of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans and its firm stance on EU sanctions against Russia.

Central Europe and NATO: Central Europe has been central to any far-reaching discussion on NATO’s defense and deterrence posture even before two waves of enlargement (1999 and 2004). Currently, 14 of 30 NATO members belong to this region and the Western Balkans. As a direct consequence of their coordinated efforts, Central European NATO allies host six NATO regional headquarters, eight NATO Force Integration Units, 11 NATO Centers of Excellence,



four battlegroups and more than 5,000 NATO troops on a rotating basis. But beyond numbers, Central Europe has been instrumental in raising informational and situational awareness regarding Russia's aggressive military posture and strategic assertiveness by pointing constantly and effectively to the threat from the east in various NATO bodies and meetings. Regional cooperation boosted Central Europe's contributions to NATO's transformation and its renewed emphasis on territorial defense and Article 5 operations. Central European voices have indeed been united in advocating a larger presence of NATO troops and equipment along the eastern flank, but also in drawing the attention of the Alliance as a whole to what could be the main political priority in the coming years: preserving allied unity, solidarity and cohesion in confronting any competitor and any adversary, if needed.

Central Europe and the U.S.: Subregional cooperation in Central Europe has been encouraged and facilitated by the U.S., which has been perceived as the indispensable guarantor of impartiality and meaningfulness. The region has been high on the American foreign policy agenda for almost a century. As American diplomat Daniel Fried observed: "In Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, America had included arrangements for Central Europe as an integral element of a general post-WWI settlement." Regarding what America should do now, Fried shared the view that the "U.S. needs to be present in and with Central Europe, with a strategic message about why the West and its values matter." And America is doing exactly this. Sending troops to the Baltic states, Poland and Romania, supporting B9 and 3SI

Demonstrators wave Georgian national flags in front of the Parliament building in Tbilisi and denounce the government as overly friendly to Russia.
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cooperation initiatives and helping countries defend against Russian aggression sends the signal that enforcement of red lines in Central Europe is credible.

Central Europe and the trans-Atlantic link: Central Europe can provide opportunities for stronger, meaningful NATO-EU cooperation, therefore contributing to a more balanced, reinvented trans-Atlantic link. The B9 and 3SI belong to the same category of endeavors designed to reinforce each other and promote, at the same time, defensive and offensive agendas. The strategic resilience of Central Europe and NATO's eastern flank could very well be part of an enlarged common NATO-EU agenda. Its deterrence dimension could stem from the unmatched ability of both organizations to build dual-use capacities and capabilities (such as rail-to-sea North-South connections from the Baltic to the Adriatic and Black seas) that are interoperable and complementary. Central Europe could be a testing ground for a new, productive trans-Atlantic solidarity and interdependence, motivated by the fight for global relevance, not (only) by fear.

Central Europe and Russia: Central European countries are the NATO and EU members most affected by Russia's renewed aggressiveness. Their new but not yet fully assumed geopolitical identity derives from their geographical proximity to a resurgent, ambitious and opportunistic

global player. Subregional cooperation along NATO's eastern flank, perhaps incomplete and maybe still modest, has made a crucial contribution to this identity. Central Europe has been one of the main sources of informational and situational awareness on what is going on beyond NATO's eastern frontier. As a direct result of regional coordination, NATO took several steps away from its post-Cold War strategic complacency toward Russia, injecting a renewed political energy into defense investments meant to counter the Russian threat.

A united, strong and resilient NATO eastern flank could deter aggression by making any offensive operation more costly and more dangerous for the perpetrator. The value added of Central European states' individual efforts to strengthen national resilience is their cumulative impact, enhanced by regional cooperation, on the common capacity to resist pressure and repel Russia's subconventional or hybrid attacks that target societal and economic vulnerabilities. As designed by the B9 and 3SI, regional cooperation in Central Europe would indeed favor "bringing together a varied community of people, military and civilian, all invested in defending what they hold dear," Johanna Möhring, an associate researcher at the Thucyde Centre in Paris, writes in the web publication *War on the Rocks*. On this basis, it could be easier to draw red lines in Central Europe, the crossing of which would be immensely detrimental to Russia and intolerable for the West.

Central Europe and Poland-Romania: Poland and Romania are the largest eastern flank countries. Their combined population and gross domestic product account for more than half of Central Europe's population and gross domestic product, and their combined defense budgets amount to approximately 15 billion euros annually. It was no coincidence that Warsaw and Bucharest assumed a leading role in promoting regional cooperation in Central Europe as a defense delivery vehicle, using their posture within NATO, their special relationships with the U.S. and their similar positions on key subjects such as Russia, arms control and PESCO. Romania and Poland have developed a unique model of partnership based upon mutual acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses, actionable diplomatic and military rapprochement and common regional responsibility. Mutual deployment of troops has been part of that model. Regional cooperation gave Romania and Poland space to exercise their ability to mobilize regional resources and streamline regional efforts for the benefit of regional security as part of a larger undertaking to make NATO and the EU aware that the eastern flank is indeed the first line of defense against eastern threats and challenges and deserves the full attention of all Allies.

The slow yet tangible progress of both the B9 and 3SI pushed Central Europe higher on the Western security supply chain. Romania and Poland, which host or are expected to host key NATO air defense capabilities, have been facilitators

An officer of the Donbas volunteer battalion holds the battalion colors in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 2014. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



and enablers of both initiatives and their roles remain central to regional cooperation because there are reasons to assume Bucharest and Warsaw share the view that, as Möhring writes, “defense and security cooperation is a child of necessity, animated by deeper geopolitical trends and driven by efficiency and legitimacy considerations.”

Recommendations: Get stronger, stay united, be relevant

For subregional cooperation to succeed, it must follow a clear set of objectives and be carried out according to a set of principles. It must serve interests and solve problems. Regional cooperation is not an aim in itself; rather, it is a vehicle to deliver a fair number of dividends to all stakeholders and work for all participants as a multiplier of force and influence. If countries involved decide to continue cooperating in Central Europe, they should consider the following recommendations:

- **First**, subregional cooperation in Central Europe should remain connected to the EU agenda. Together, V4, B9 and 3SI countries can further contribute to a more balanced, yet comprehensive and ambitious EU foreign policy and security agenda, especially regarding the future of EaP and EU enlargement. V4, B9 and 3SI could serve as instruments to further anchor EaP countries and Western Balkans candidates to EU membership in the European mainstream, by a selective and well-prepared engagement with pro-European political forces and civil society in these states, helping them overcome temporary obstacles and shortcomings. Central European states are best positioned for that because their own integration experience is still fresh and easier to transfer and share, but also because they now know how to draw the attention of great powers to the geopolitical value of an area when that value is not always obvious to everyone. V4, B9 and 3SI agendas could be correlated and adapted to include EaP and Western Balkans issues to a larger extent.
- **Second**, within NATO, Central Europe must secure a strong common voice and a solid profile. Capitalizing on the success achieved in highlighting the eastern flank’s importance, B9 countries can consider an articulated, balanced and ambitious contribution to future debates regarding a New Strategic Concept of the Alliance. This process could be mutually reinforced with an academic dialogue on strategic issues among Germany, Poland, Romania and the U.S., mediated or framed by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. At the same time, B9 allies could develop a more effective strategy to further shape NATO and EU agendas regarding strategic forecasting and strategic thinking, hybrid warfare, cyber security, military mobility and nuclear policy in close correlation with eastern flank countries.
- **Third**, Central Europe must be more vocal and more effective in supporting/advocating a stronger U.S. presence in and commitment to the region militarily, politically and economically. Joint and periodic endeavors in Washington could make the difference in capturing the attention of the U.S. Congress, the American academic community and the American press.
- **Fourth**, Central European states must stay united against military aggression and illegal annexation of foreign territories, and in defending international law and human rights. Values, principles and norms matter as the first line of moral and psychological defense against those who challenge the validity of democratic mechanisms and institutions.
- **Fifth**, a stronger, deeper dialogue/cooperation among B9 countries could result in joint/common assessments on security challenges and a common understanding of priorities and means to achieve common/shared objectives. One of them could be reaching regional cognitive interoperability together with military interoperability and creating capabilities in the area of strategic planning as part of NATO’s defense planning. Joint procurement projects/programs and a certain division of labor among Central European allies in terms of training and education can only serve that purpose and facilitate strategic interdependence, seen as an asset for Central Europe and for NATO. In this context, B9 allies could look into the feasibility of a “B9 Consortium of Military Academies,” a functional network of academic institutions serving, among others, the purpose of sharing lessons learned and best practices in training and education, with special emphasis on internalizing warfare experience accumulated by Central European allies in various theaters of operation since joining NATO. Integrating air defense systems and an intensified dialogue on (counter) intelligence should be top priorities for B9 countries as well. Cost effective projects that address interoperability and cooperation in these areas should be considered and budgeted appropriately in the next five to 10 years.
- **Sixth**, successful subregional cooperation must strike the right balance between affordability, acceptability and appropriateness. Central European states have invested a considerable amount of resources in regional cooperation. So far, the results have outweighed or at least matched associated expectations with all existing formats. In the future, the cost effectiveness of regional cooperation should be observed. V4, B9 and 3SI must deliver, otherwise public support could be lost.
- **Seventh**, one of the highest priorities for Central Europe is north-south mobility and connectivity, including digitalization and the transport of energy. Mobility and connectivity are relevant for security and important to development and growth. Central European countries could therefore use subregional cooperation to promote an ambitious regional innovation agenda on digitalization with the aim of creating an innovation friendly information technology ecosystem.
- **Last but not least**, Central European countries should work cooperatively for the common goal of strategic resilience. Once achieved politically, this could be translated into a new set of policies that could make the eastern flank geopolitically significant and impossible to overlook by any global player with interests in Europe and its close proximity. Central Europe would then remain central to the Euro-Atlantic agenda for long enough to become universally acknowledged as worth investing in, defending and developing. □