

The Primacy of Politics? Arms Imports and Political Relations of the Visegrád Countries 1999–2020¹

Part 1

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International commerce can be determined by the political climate between the exporter and the importer. Arms transfers are a much complex process, where beyond economic factors, alliance ties, security perception and defence planning are also considered. Still, they might not be independent of political relations. This paper aims to capture the arms supplier–recipient relations between the Visegrád countries and Russia, the United States and Germany from 1999 to 2020. More specifically, how do the two factors affect each other: are good political relations necessary for arms deals? Or do arms deals facilitate a friendly political climate? Our conclusion is as follows. On the one hand, a cooperative political climate increases the probability of arms deals, but they are not a necessity, as mutual benefits and security perceptions can override the current political climate. On the other hand, however, arms transfers can deepen cooperation or alleviate the existing differences between the parties.

Keywords: arms trade, Visegrád Countries, bilateral relations, security policy, the United States, the Russian Federation, Germany

Introduction

Arms imports are determined by numerous factors, from economic development and alliance ties to security perception and defence planning.³ However, if commerce between two states can be affected by the political climate between them, so might arms transfers.⁴ This paper aims to capture the arms supplier–recipient relations between the Visegrád

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³ Frederic S. Pearson: The Priorities of Arms Importing States Reviewed. *Arms Control*, 9, no. 2 (1988). 171.

⁴ With “arms transfers” we refer not only to arms sales, but also to other forms of weapon supply, like military aid or manufacturing licences. Therefore, we rather use arms transfers instead of arms trade.

countries and the Russian Federation, the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany. More specifically, how do the two factors affect each other: are good political relations necessary for arms deals? Or do arms deals facilitate a friendly political climate?

In the academic literature on the relations of the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) with the United States, Russia or Germany⁵ arms imports are generally mentioned as elements of bilateral cooperation. However, the topic has hardly been systematically examined, despite the fact that arms transfers to this region are becoming highly relevant today, since these countries increasingly focus on military modernisation and replacing their Soviet-era equipment.⁶ In addition, only a few works have examined the defence cooperation of these countries with Germany,⁷ Russia⁸ or the U.S.⁹ (Nonetheless, there is a wide scope of academic literature dealing with the defence cooperation of the Visegrád countries.¹⁰) With this paper, we hope to contribute to the literature on the political relations of the CEE countries by extending the scope to arms transfers. Furthermore, the paper's regional perspective may also serve the broader literature dealing with systematic examination of arms transfers.

Arms transfers and political relations

Theoretical and empirical findings of the academic literature on commerce and international political interactions have proven that political considerations can have a significant impact on decision-making beyond pure economic aspects. Notably, bilateral trade decisions are affected by the parties' general foreign policy orientation towards each other and the actual climate of friendliness or hostility. Consequently, bilateral trade flow is decreased when political relations become more conflictual, whereas it will increase when political relations become more cooperative. This phenomenon is illustrated by the

⁵ Recent works on the topic for example: Anna Péczeli (ed.): *The Relations of Central European Countries with the United States*. Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019; András Hettyey (ed.): *Germany and Central Europe: Drifting Apart?* Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2020; Andrei Zagorski (ed.): *Russia and East Central Europe after the Cold War*. Prague, Human Rights Publishers, 2015.

⁶ Jaroslaw Adamowski: Russian Militancy Drives Eastern European Modernization. *Defense News*, 01 November 2015.

⁷ Zdeněk Kříž et al.: Defense Co-Operation Between Germany and the Visegrad Countries. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31, no. 3 (2018). 354–371.

⁸ Ian Anthony (ed.): *Russia and the Arms Trade*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1998; Zagorski (2015): op. cit.

⁹ Gábor Csizmazia: Az Egyesült Államok kül- és biztonságpolitikája Kelet-Közép-Európában 2009–2019 között. PhD Thesis. University of Public Service, 2020; Dániel Bartha – Péter Rada: The Role of the Visegrád Countries in the Transatlantic Future. *Biztopol Affairs*, 2, no. 1 (2014); Péter Rada: Pivot to Asia and the Role of the Visegrád Countries in the Transatlantic Future after 2014. In Marian Majer – Róbert Ondrejcsák (eds.): *Panorama of Global Security Environment 2013*. Bratislava, Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, 2013. 121–136.

¹⁰ See for example: Juraj Krupa: Visegrad Four Defense Cooperation: Years of Missed Opportunities. *The Warsaw Institute Review*, 5 July 2019; Marcin Urbański – Karol Dołęga: The Visegrad Group in the Western Security System. *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 9, no. 4 (2015). 5–37; Anna Molnár – Zoltán Szenes: Cooperation or Integration? The New Defence Initiatives in the Visegrád Group. In Christian Schweiger – Anna Visvizi (eds.): *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU. Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions*. London, Routledge, 2018.

U.S.–Soviet trade before, during and after the *Détente* and the West German trade with the Eastern Bloc following the *Ostpolitik*.¹¹

It is highly probable that foreign policy alignment and the current diplomatic climate strongly affect arms transfers because arms are not solely commercial products: they can be harmful to internal and external actors or alter the regional balance of power. Thus, arms transfers may require a certain trust between supplier and recipient, especially in the case of highly advanced weapon systems. First, the supplier must ensure that the weapon is not used against its interests or sensitive information is not leaked to a third party.¹² Second, knowing that the recipient becomes (to some extent) dependent on the supplier in terms of logistic support, spares parts and even military training and offset programs, it may prefer a reliable supplier.¹³ As such, close and trustful bilateral relations may be necessary for arms deals.

However, arms transfers also differ from general commercial trade in the way that they are essential elements of defence diplomacy. Since arms transfers carry many long-term commitments through joint ventures, maintenance, training, supply of spares, modifications and transfer of technology, they necessitate an institutionalised dialogue between defence specialist and military personnel, which ultimately facilitates cooperation and confidence between the parties.¹⁴ Furthermore, military aids which demand only symbolic financial compensation may express goodwill or solidarity toward the recipient. In public diplomacy, arms transfers support the liberal theory of international relations, which contends that interaction, cooperation and dialogue alleviate conflict and promote close relations.¹⁵

Based on these theoretical assumptions, the hypotheses of the paper are summarised as follows:

- cooperative relations facilitate the increase of arms imports of the Visegrád countries
- bilateral tensions and disputes decrease the arms imports of the Visegrád countries
- an increase of arms imports improves relations or at least alleviate the existing conflict between the Visegrád countries and the main three suppliers

¹¹ Brian M. Pollins: Conflict, Cooperation, and Commerce: The Effect of International Political Interactions on Bilateral Trade Flows. *American Journal of Political Science*, 33, no. 3 (1989). 739–741; Omar M. G. Keshk et al.: Trade Still Follows the Flag: The Primacy of Politics in a Simultaneous Model of Interdependence and Armed Conflict. *The Journal of Politics*, 66, no. 4 (2004). 1171.

¹² A well-known example is Turkey's failed F-35 deal. See Deutsche Welle: US Removes Turkey from F-35 Program after S-400 Fiasco. *DW*, 07 July 2019.

¹³ Panitan Wattanayagorn: ASEAN's Arms Modernization and Arms Transfers Dependence. *The Pacific Review*, 8, no. 3 (1995). 499.

¹⁴ Frédéric Charillon et al.: Defense Diplomacy. In Thierry Balzacq – Frédéric Charillon – Frédéric Ramel (eds.): *Global Diplomacy. An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 271–272, 274; B. S. Sachar: Military Diplomacy Through Arms Transfers: A Case Study of China. *Strategic Analysis*, 28, no. 2 (2004). 291.

¹⁵ Charillon et al.: op. cit. 272.

Methodology and structure of the paper

The research concentrates on the major conventional weapon (MCW)¹⁶ imports of the Visegrád Countries (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia) based on data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and other academic and media sources.¹⁷ It should be emphasised that our research does not focus on other types of military equipment, like small arms, helmets, bulletproof vests and communications equipment, which may facilitate military cooperation but tell little about political relations. The research period concentrates primarily on the years between 1999 and 2020, as it was in 1999 that the V4 countries (except Slovakia) joined NATO.

The foreign and security policy aspects of the arms imports of the V4 are examined in this paper only as regards those three arms exporters, which are key international actors for the V4 countries, in both political and economic terms, as global or regional powers. These are the Russian Federation, the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany.¹⁸ They have also been for a long time among the top arms exporters of the world. To test our hypotheses, we examine the bilateral relations of the V4 countries in the first part toward Russia and the U.S. and in the second part toward Germany, before and after the arms import decisions.

Nevertheless, a complete discussion of relations of the V4 and their leading exporters lies beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, we concentrate our study strictly on the most important political and security issues of the last 19 years; economic or cultural relations are excluded or only marginally examined. The reader should bear in mind that the study is based on available open sources and interviews. The true intentions of the former and current decision-makers remain unknown to us; thus, we may miss some crucial aspects of arms import decisions.

Arms imports and relations with the Russian Federation

By 1999, the ties that existed in the former Eastern bloc between the Visegrád countries and Russia broke down. While Russia lost its interest in the region, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined NATO, and they were on a solid track to the EU. Under the first Dzurinda Government (1998–2002), Slovakia gave up the former pro-Russian policy, which ultimately led to joining NATO and the EU in 2004.¹⁹ Joining NATO inevitably led

¹⁶ Under the term “major weapons”, we follow SIPRI’s definitions of major weapons such as aircraft, air defence systems, armoured vehicles, artillery, engines, missiles, which are destined for military use. See SIPRI: *Sources and Methods*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2022a.

¹⁷ Although there are other sources for international arms trade data research (for example the UN Register of Conventional Arms), SIPRI Arms Transfers Database is “the most widely cited source of international arms trade data, and the one generally accepted as most authoritative”. About the issues of data on international arms trade see Sam Perlo Freeman: How Big is the International Arms Trade? *World Peace Foundation*, 19 July 2018. 3.

¹⁸ Kříž et al.: op. cit. 356.

¹⁹ Alexander Duleba – Boris Shmelev: Slovak–Russian Relations. In Andrei Zagorski (ed.): *Russia and East Central Europe after the Cold War*. Prague, Human Rights Publishers, 2015. 146–147.

to decreasing Russian exports to the V4, in comparison with earlier decades, as the need for interoperability grew. It may not be a coincidence that between 1990 and 2020, 79% of all Russian arms to the V4 were transferred before the year of the first Eastern NATO enlargement.²⁰ However, Russian arms exports did not vanish completely.

Around 1999–2000, the general distrust of the V4 countries towards Russia dominated the political climate, mainly because of the differences on the Kosovo War and NATO expansion.²¹ This trend is especially apparent in the Hungarian–Russian relations during the first Orbán Government (1998–2002), which openly criticised Russian political leaders and disapproved the modernisation of the MiG-29s.²² However, in the middle of the 2000s, normalisation of relations started to gain momentum through economic and defence industrial cooperation; the latter resulted in a modest increase in Russian arms exports. For example, the Czech–Russian bilateral talks on economic as well as defence industrial cooperation intensified in 2002–2003, which included an import of 17 combat and ten transport helicopters as a debt offset of 184–250 million USD.²³ The second Dzurinda Government of Slovakia in 2002 imported four transport helicopters as debt offset and in 2004 decided to modernise the MiG-29s with Russian components.²⁴

From the late 2000s and in the 2010s, Hungary and Slovakia generally took a softer approach focusing on economic and energy cooperation, with only a moderate critique of Russian aggression during the Georgian War and the Ukraine Crisis.²⁵ On the contrary, the Czech Republic and especially Poland had tense relations.²⁶ This fragmentation could be clearly seen in their reaction to the Ukraine Crisis.²⁷ However, this pattern did not consistently appear in the Russian arms transfers. Whereas in 2008, Slovakia imported 150 man-portable surface-to-surface missiles, and Hungary chose to modernise its Mi-17 transport helicopters by a Russian contractor in 2014, Poland in 2006 and 2010 ordered a few Mi-17 transport helicopters, some of them for use in Afghanistan.²⁸ As Lieutenant General (Ret.) Zoltán Szenes, who served as the Chief of the General Staff of the Hungarian Armed Forces between 2003 and 2005 outlined, good political relations likely played a role for Hungary in the helicopter modernisation, as Polish and Czech

²⁰ SIPRI: *SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, Importer/Exporter TIV Tables*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020.

²¹ Juraj Marušiak: Russia and the Visegrad Group – More than a Foreign Policy Issue. *International Issues and Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 24, no. 1–2 (2015). 32.

²² András Rácz: Towards Increasingly Balanced Relations: Hungary and Russia Since 1989. In Andrei Zagorski (ed.): *Russia and East Central Europe after the Cold War*. Prague, Human Rights Publishers, 2015. 180.

²³ Lukáš Dyčka – Miroslav Mareš: The Development and Future of Fighter Planes Acquisition in Countries of the Visegrad Group. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 25, no. 4 (2012). 533–557.

²⁴ Petra Kuchynkova et al.: Czech–Russian Relations 1989–2012. In Andrei Zagorski (ed.): *Russia and East Central Europe after the Cold War*. Prague, Human Rights Publishers, 2015; SIPRI: *SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, Trade Registers*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2022b.

²⁵ Duleba–Shmelev (2015): op. cit. 164; Rácz (2015): op. cit. 183–184.

²⁶ Kuchynkova et al. (2015): op. cit. 134; Łukasz Adamski – Artem Malgin: Polish–Russian Relations 1991–2011: On the Way to Mutual Understanding. In Andrei Zagorski (ed.): *Russia and East Central Europe after the Cold War*. Prague, Human Rights Publishers, 2015. 90–92.

²⁷ Marušiak (2015): op. cit. 38–43.

²⁸ SIPRI (2022b): op. cit.

companies could also have been contractors.²⁹ Nevertheless, the EU embargo on Russia adopted in late 2014 has prohibited the transfer of arms.³⁰

Regarding our first hypothesis, the modest renewal of defence industrial cooperation with Russia by the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the 2000s was probably facilitated by the willingness to cooperate pragmatically. President Putin's open-minded foreign policy toward Europe may have played a role, too. Furthermore, Slovakia's and Hungary's cooperative relations with Russia could have facilitated the arms deals in 2008 and 2014. Nevertheless, economic considerations likely had a stronger role. Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic had serious defence budgetary cuts in the 2000s and early 2010s. In Hungary, there was simply no political will to rearm the Hungarian Defence Forces with developed western equipment. It was cheaper and easier to maintain the existing Russian made equipment. Besides, in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, having Russian equipment even proved to be an advantage, due to climate conditions.³¹ This also could have been a reason for Poland to buy Russian helicopters in the 2000s. The economic motivation is also strongly apparent on the supplier's side, as "arms account for a large proportion of Russia's manufactured and technology-intensive exports";³² they played an important role in debt offsetting, too.

Our second assumption seems to be justified in the late 1990s, early 2000s when joining NATO resulted in the cooling of relations with Russia by all the V4 countries, which led to a decrease in arms imports from Russia. However, the hypothesis is primarily valid for Poland, which constantly saw Russia as a security threat; as such, it imported the least Russian arms; from the later 2000s, the same is valid for the Czech Republic.

Finally, evidence for our third hypothesis has been found, because major arms deals at least contributed to the re-establishment of pragmatic cooperation in the 2000s. However, they did not have a long-term impact. In conclusion, the results demonstrate that economic and alliance considerations were much more dominant in the flow of Russian MCWs to the V4.

Arms imports and relations with the United States

The relations of the Visegrád states with the U.S. had been already intensely cooperative before the NATO enlargement took place, as the prospects for NATO membership motivated the V4; the contribution to military engagements in the Yugoslav Wars was respected by the U.S., NATO membership created favourable conditions for significant arms deals since it directly impacted the CEE states' security and defence policies, and also their armed forces, in terms of modernisation, organisation and armaments.³³ Imports from the U.S. are examined in three periods.

²⁹ Interview with Lieutenant General (Ret.) Zoltán Szenes, 09 April 2021.

³⁰ SIPRI: *EU Embargo on Russia*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2014.

³¹ Interview with Lieutenant General (Ret.) Zoltán Szenes, 09 April 2021.

³² Richard Connolly – Cecilie Sendstad: Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter. *Chatham House*, March 2017. 22.

³³ Yudit Kiss: *Arms Industry Transformation and Integration. The Choices of East Central Europe*. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Oxford University Press, 2014. 377–381.

First, the period from 2000 until around 2008 proved to be the ‘golden age’, as the volume of U.S. arms exports increased, and the political relations gained considerable importance. Nevertheless, U.S.–Polish relations by this time had been already on a much higher level than with the other countries. It is illustrative that only Poland signed a deal on the procurement of 48 F-16C fighters and accompanying armaments in late 2002. Although Poland was given for the purchase a favourable loan of 3.8 billion USD and the deal involved offset investments of nearly 8 billion USD, political considerations were the most dominant. By procuring F-16s, Poland sent a clear political message to its allies, clearly expressing its commitment to the U.S.³⁴ Almost simultaneously, Poland, contrary to France and Germany, decided to support the War in Iraq, and soon even took the role of a leading nation with a contingent of 2,300 troops stabilising the south-central zone.³⁵ Although there is no convincing evidence that underpins the explicit connection between the support for Iraq and the purchase of the aircraft,³⁶ the correlation of these actions still reflects Poland’s preference for the U.S. over the European partners.³⁷ It is noteworthy that despite the fighter jets’ numerous technical faults, Poland continued to be a firm Atlanticist, for example, by supporting the deployment of the U.S. National Missile Defence System.³⁸

Even though Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic contributed both politically and militarily to the U.S.-led military interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq as well, the political relations did not gain such significance as in the case of Poland. The Czech Republic and Hungary opted for Swedish Gripen fighters instead of the American F-16s, mainly due to the significant offset offer.³⁹ Although these decisions did not have a positive impact on bilateral relations, they did not have a long-term effect. Between 2002 and 2006, G. W. Bush met four times with the Hungarian prime ministers, whereas the Czech Republic kept supporting the deployment of the missile defence system.⁴⁰ Both countries procured U.S. produced armament and engines for the Gripens in 2004–2005, later Hungary even imported 100 Maverick missiles, a joint venture was also set up for

³⁴ Dyčka–Mareš (2012): op. cit. 546.

³⁵ Tomasz Smura: Relations between the United States and Poland: From Enemy to the Main Security Guarantor. In Anna Péczeli (ed.): *The Relations of Central European Countries with the United States*. Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019. 105.

³⁶ It is noteworthy that with the invitation to the EU, the European bidders (especially the French) were also pressuring Poland not to buy the American F-16. European companies also tried to convince Poland that by buying European-made fighter jets the European defence industrial potential will be significantly increased. Thus, the European’s pressure could have been counterproductive. See Barre R. Seguin: Why did Poland Choose the F-16? *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, June 2007.

³⁷ Keith Lambert Carter: *Great Power, Arms and Alliances*. PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2019. 83; Kiss (2014): op. cit. 116–121; Dyčka–Mareš (2012): op. cit. 117.

³⁸ Kiss (2014): op. cit. 119–120; Gábor Csizmazia: Decisive Change or Determined Continuity? The Trump Administration’s Foreign and Security Policy Viewed from Central and Eastern Europe. *AARMS*, 16, no. 3 (2017). 110.

³⁹ Dyčka–Mareš (2020): op. cit. 539; Interview with Lieutenant General (Ret.) Zoltán Szenes, 09 April 2021.

⁴⁰ Gábor Csizmazia: Relations between the United States and Hungary. In Anna Péczeli (ed.): *The Relations of Central European Countries with the United States*. Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019. 82; Judit Hamberger: Atlanticism and Security Policy in Poland and in the Czech Republic. *HIIA Papers*, 2008/14. 12; Ferenc Gazdag (ed.): *A magyar külpolitika 1989–2014*. Budapest, Nemzeti Közszerkesztési Intézet, 2014. 185.

maintenance.⁴¹ However, offensive weapon systems were not procured by the Czech Republic and Hungary.⁴² In addition, the purchase of American missiles was the only realistic option, as it could have been very costly and irrational to install a new armament system.

Slovakia was the only country that did not purchase any American MCWs until the mid-2010s. The Slovak–American relations have been clearly affected by the anti-American attitude of the Slovakian society, in which the aversion to U.S. policy of unilateral military interventions played an obvious role, especially during the first Robert Fico Government (2006–2010) despite the early troop support in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴³

In the second phase, between 2009 and 2016, political relations had become more tenuous as the U.S. initially focused more on withdrawing from the Middle East, as well as on its pivot to Asia and its “reset” policy with Russia, with less attention paid to the CEE region overall.⁴⁴ The Czech Republic could not find a specific role in the modified missile defence system (European Phased Adaptive Approach); Poland in 2009 could not agree with the U.S. on a satisfying price of Patriot missiles.⁴⁵ The Obama Administration also criticised the Hungarian and Polish political, economic and judicial reforms in 2014–2016.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the volume of arms exports to the V4 decreased, although armoured vehicles for use in Afghanistan were loaned to Hungary and Poland.⁴⁷ However, it should be remembered that the defence budgets of the V4 countries were severely affected by the economic crisis that coincided with the Obama Administrations. Due to economic constraints, they could not afford it – even if they intended to buy American weapons. The defence budgets have started to grow mainly during the Trump Administration (see Figure 1).

This argument may also be underpinned by the fact that in 2011 the Czech Republic intended to buy F-16s, but due to the high price, it dropped the plans.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Slovakia for the first time, imported from the U.S. nine Blackhawk helicopters for 261 million USD in 2015.⁴⁹ What also stands out is that in 2015, the Polish Government initially decided to purchase 50 European-made Caracal combat helicopters, but the PiS-led government withdrew from the negotiations because it wanted to buy American helicopters. However, as there were no similar U.S. helicopters available on the market, the purchase was eventually cancelled.⁵⁰

⁴¹ Kiss (2014): op. cit. 165.

⁴² SIPRI (2022b): op. cit.

⁴³ Dušan Fischer: Relations between the United States and Slovakia: Friends and Allies between 1989 and 2017. In Anna Péczeli (ed.): *The Relations of Central European Countries with the United States*. Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019. 168–169.

⁴⁴ Csizmazia (2017): op. cit. 113.

⁴⁵ Monika Brusenbauch Meislová: Relations between the United States and the Czech Republic. In Anna Péczeli (ed.): *The Relations of Central European Countries with the United States*. Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019. 62; Smura (2019): op. cit. 112.

⁴⁶ Jan Cienski et al.: Polish–American Romance Sours. *Politico*, 15 March 2016; Csizmazia (2019): op. cit. 89.

⁴⁷ SIPRI (2022b): op. cit.

⁴⁸ Csizmazia (2020): op. cit. 143.

⁴⁹ SIPRI (2022b): op. cit.

⁵⁰ Ryszard Zięba: *Poland's Foreign and Security Policy. Problems of Compatibility with the Changing International Order*. Cham, Springer, 2020. 119.

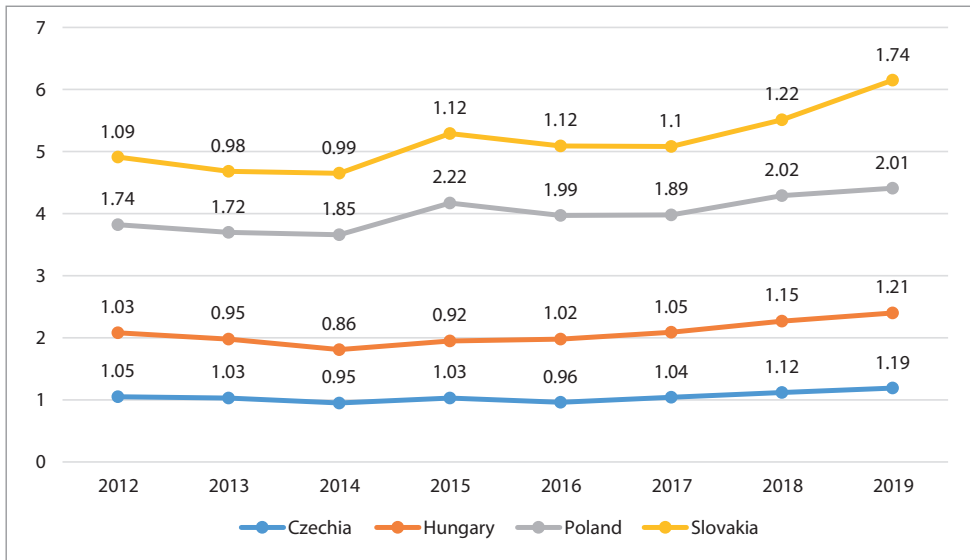


Figure 1: Defence expenditures of the V4 in percentage of GDP 2012–2019

Source: NATO (2016): *op. cit.* 6; NATO (2019): *op. cit.* 8.

The political relations started to change with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The U.S. became the first NATO member to provide political support to the states in the region by increasing its military presence through the European Reassurance Initiative and the NATO collective defence measures.⁵¹ However, serious change in the relations occurred from 2017, as the new Trump Administration took a different approach towards the CEE region. The boost of the U.S. military presence continued; the mutual sympathy gave a further impetus for the political relations. The mutually shared conservatism and the EU-scepticism of the Hungarian and Polish governments and the Trump Administration helped finding a common ground. In 2019 President Trump met with all the heads of state or government from the V4.⁵² American arms exports to the V4 have also shown a steady increase, and they even included a larger amount of sophisticated weapon systems.

After 2015 Poland considerably strengthened its relations with the U.S. because of its growing fears of Russian aggression. Notably, it requested a permanent American military presence ('Fort Trump'), and in 2019 signed a bilateral defence agreement to strengthen U.S. military infrastructure, whose costs will be funded by Poland. Simultaneously, it signed a series of strategic agreements on arms deals, which significantly contributed to the implementation of the Technical Modernization Program of the Polish military.⁵³ These have included air-to-surface, air-to-air and anti-tank missiles, guided bombs, transport aircraft, Patriot missiles, but also helicopters, UAVs, rocket systems; and

⁵¹ Csizmazia (2017): *op. cit.* 11, 122.

⁵² Csizmazia (2020): *op. cit.* 205, 220.

⁵³ Zięba (2020): *op. cit.* 117–119.

most importantly in 2019, 32 highly advanced F-35A multirole fighters for 4.6 billion USD.⁵⁴ Once again, political considerations had dominated the procurement decisions, as illustrated by the preference of the Polish Government for American companies over European ones and the fact that the government did not consult the opposition before the F-35A deal was negotiated. Furthermore, the deal does not include any offset investment for the modernisation of the Polish defence industry.⁵⁵ Other examples, like the Polish support for the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran and the redundancy in accepting the EU's Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China are strong signs of Atlanticism, too.⁵⁶

The other three countries' relations with the U.S. also intensified during the Trump Presidency, although once again to a lower degree. The Czech Republic, along with Hungary and Romania, blocked an EU statement criticising the transfer of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Moreover, 5G network and cyber threats from China as well as energy cooperation became a subject of Czech–American bilateral talks, but the U.S.–EU trade dispute did not favour the Czech Republic as its economy is export-oriented. The U.S. is still the main guarantor of Czech security, which is shown in the purchase of eight UH-1Y Venom and four AH-1Z Viper combat helicopters for 650 million USD in 2019. The helicopters are so far the highest valued Czech–American arms deal.⁵⁷

After the tense political relations with the Obama Administration, the Trump Administration had much better relations with the Hungarian Government. After more than ten years, in May 2019 Viktor Orbán became the next Hungarian Prime Minister to visit the White House. A year later, the State Department gave a green light to Hungary for the procurement of 60 AMRAAM-ER⁵⁸ missiles and NASAMS⁵⁹ short- and medium-range air-defence system.⁶⁰ Following a two years long negotiation process (because of disagreement over legal issues), the Defence Cooperation Agreement with the U.S. was finally renewed in 2019, which enabled the U.S. Department of Defense to invest in the modernisation of the Hungarian military infrastructure.⁶¹ Nevertheless, we do not assume that the arms procurement has tremendously effected the Hungarian–American relations: the Hungarian military sooner or later had to procure additional U.S.-made armament for the Gripens as it is the only realistic option to maintain the capability, moreover, after the announcement of the arms deal, U.S. government politicians still remained divided over

⁵⁴ Congressional Research Service: *Poland: Background and U.S. Relations*. 25 June 2019. 13.

⁵⁵ Zięba (2020): op. cit. 123, 125; Monika Sieradzka: US-Konzerne modernisieren Polens Militär. *mdr.de*, 20 September 2020.

⁵⁶ Paweł Paszak: Poland–China Relations in 2021: Current State and Prospects. *Warsaw Institute*, 29 January 2021; Zięba (2020): op. cit. 123.

⁵⁷ Claudette Roulo: U.S., Czech Republic Agree to Sale of Helicopters. *U.S. Department of Defense*, 12 December 2019; Łukasz Ogrodnik: Intensification of Czech–U.S. Relations. *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, 11 July 2019.

⁵⁸ Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles Extended Range.

⁵⁹ National/Norwegian Advanced Surface to Air Missile System.

⁶⁰ Sebastian Sprenger: Hungary Plunks Down \$1 Billion for New Air Defenses. *Defense News*, 13 August 2020; Marton Dunai: Orban Says He Discussed Missiles and Natural Gas with Trump. *Reuters*, 17 May 2019.

⁶¹ Béla Gyömbér: Az USA és Magyarország közötti védelmi együttműködés. *Jogalappal*, 05 April 2019.

Hungary, some of them criticised its violation of the rule of law or its closer connections to China and Russia.⁶²

The neglected Slovakian–American relations were renewed during the third phase. Slovakia had been in talks with the Swedish Government about the purchase of Gripens, but the SNS coalition party pushed for other bidders, including Lockheed Martin. After some hesitation, the Pellegrini Government finally agreed with the U.S. company in December 2018 to purchase 14 F-16Vs for 1.8 billion USD.⁶³ According to Slovakian experts, buying Gripens could have been cheaper and more practical to cooperate with the Hungarian and Czech air force, but Slovakia rather chose to strengthen relations with the U.S.⁶⁴ Unsurprisingly, in February 2019, Mike Pompeo visited Bratislava as the first U.S. Secretary of State. Besides, through the funding of the U.S. State Department, Slovakia was granted 50 million USD for its Blackhawk procurement.⁶⁵ The new Slovakian security strategy adopted in 2020, contrary to the earlier governments, better reflected the U.S. security concerns, like Chinese and Russian influence.⁶⁶

To conclude, in the first phase (2000–2008), the general cooperative political relations undoubtedly resulted in increased arms transfers to the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Although NATO membership was a strong reason to buy American weapons, it was not an inevitable necessity, as Slovakia's example shows. Overall, we assess that the first hypothesis is particularly valid for Poland, which is underpinned by the fact that in this period, 92% of U.S. MCWs to the V4 states were imported by Poland, and only Poland procured U.S. aircraft.⁶⁷ In the second phase (2009–2016), because of the economic crisis, convincing evidence for causality between the decrease of arms imports and the diplomatic cooldown cannot be found, as financial considerations determined the procurement options. During the third phase (2017–2020), however, the cooperative nature of relations, due to the security reassurance and later the sympathy toward the Trump Presidency, provided favourable conditions for the increase of arms imports which entailed even highly advanced offensive MCWs. Once again, the Polish share of U.S. arms was the highest with 78%.⁶⁸

Regarding our third hypothesis, arms deals with the U.S. did improve bilateral relations, which is especially valid for advanced offensive weapons systems. The procurement of aircraft and other arms by Poland strengthened the security and foreign policy commitment towards the U.S. The case of Slovakia is especially illustrative, whose relations with the U.S. suddenly changed after buying F-16s. In general, arms imports

⁶² Keno Verseck: Opinion: Donald Trump's Lonely Dream of Viktor Orban-like Power. *DW*, 14 May 2019.

⁶³ The Defense Post. *Lockheed Awarded \$800 Million Slovakia F-16 Fighter Jet Contract*. 1 August 2019.

⁶⁴ Otakar Berger: Slovakia to Buy Fighting Falcons. *czdjournal*, 12 July 2018.

⁶⁵ SIPRI (2022b): op. cit.; Aaron Mehta: Special US Fund to Replace Russian Equipment in Europe Is Shifting Its Strategy. *Defense News*, 18 March 2020; SIPRI (2022b): op. cit.

⁶⁶ Łukasz Ogrodnik: Slovakia's New Security and Defence Strategies. *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, 26 February 2021.

⁶⁷ Estimated from the data of SIPRI (2020): op. cit.

⁶⁸ Estimated from the data of SIPRI (2020): op. cit.

proved to be a vital element of broader defence cooperation, which showed resilience to diplomatic tensions and sustained pragmatic cooperation.⁶⁹

Preliminary assessment

Three aspects have been examined above. We assumed that friendly diplomatic relations are more likely to lead to arms deals, and the opposite is true for poor diplomatic relations. Our third hypothesis is that arms deals as important tools of defence diplomacy improve diplomatic relations in general. The results so far give us a mixed picture. Mutually good relations have played a prominent role in arms imports from the United States, but the purchase of Russian arms has been more of a financial and practical necessity. Only for Russia did deteriorating political relations lead to a traceable decline in arms sales. However, the third hypothesis seems to be clearly confirmed, as in both cases arms deals contributed to the maintenance of bilateral relations. As a preliminary conclusion, it can be concluded that arms import decisions can be affected by multiple factors. Arms import choices are not exclusively driven by the current political bilateral relations: financial and defence policy priorities can be equally or even more decisive.

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⁶⁹ Anna Péczeli: Comparing Trends in the Relations of Central European Countries with the United States. In Anna Péczeli (ed.): *The Relations of Central European Countries with the United States*. Budapest, Dialóg Campus, 2019. 229.

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