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IDEAS LEADERSHIP HOPE

Report



The Bucharest Nine

Enhancing Security on NATO's Eastern Flank

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Summary

The Bucharest Nine (B9) format was established in 2015 in response to the evolving security landscape in Europe, particularly in light of Russia's aggressive geopolitical revisionism, especially its military actions against Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea. It brings together nine Central and Eastern European countries aiming to bolster their defense capabilities and to enhance collaboration with other NATO members. Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia use the B9 primarily as a platform to coordinate their positions and exchange views on shared interests, particularly in security, defense, and energy security. Its primary focus is to enhance the security of NATO's eastern flank and stability of the region, which has been significantly impacted by Russia's aggression. This prompted the B9 countries to take robust action to address the challenges this poses.

The B9 was established based on two complementary rationales: a strategic rationale to enhance collective security and safeguard the interests of the nine countries through strategic deterrence, and a political rationale to build and accumulate their political capital within NATO. The format has been instrumental for them to advocate increased defense spending, resilience building, and shaping NATO's strategic deterrence on its eastern flank. It has also been used to emphasize the need for military infrastructure development—including air bases, ports, command centers, and logistical facilities—to ensure a credible deterrence posture vis-à-vis Russia. Since February 2022, the B9 priority has included ensuring Ukraine's survival as an independent state and supporting its closer integration into the security architecture of the region, including NATO membership. While the format has been less used in EU decision-making processes, the B9 has aligned itself with the EU post-2022 sanctions regime against Russia.

The B9 has maintained a flexible approach, convening meetings as needed and bringing together government leaders and officials to address emerging security concerns. Its influence has been significant, particularly in shaping NATO's strategic deterrence and advocating key priorities within the alliance. In the future, the B9 is likely to concentrate on the further enhancement of NATO's footprint on the eastern flank through a greater military presence and key capabilities for strategic deterrence, and also on boosting resilience in the member countries and on supporting Ukraine (and Moldova) with their urgent security needs.

In this perspective, the B9 should: continue to prioritize support for Ukraine, particularly where it can do so without significant material military assistance; advocate the further structural enhancement of Central and Eastern Europe's integration into NATO's functional assets; promote greater military mobility, advocate the establishment of a long-term NATO air and missile defense model, and enhancing societal resilience and addressing hybrid threats at the EU level.

Introduction

The Bucharest Nine (B9) format was created in reaction to the changed security environment in Europe by the NATO members most directly threatened by Russia's aggressive geopolitical revisionism. It brings together nine countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that want to strengthen their defense capabilities and enhance their cooperation with other NATO members. This paper maps the evolution of the format since its inception, highlighting the relevance of this regional-level cooperation within the alliance. The B9 is solely oriented toward defense and security and has enjoyed preeminence among the other broader CEE regional formats for cooperation. This is due to the fact that, over the past decade, security challenges more than anything else have shaped the political relations in this region.

This paper sets out the basic rationale behind the formation and solidification of the B9 format and looks at the current priorities the member countries. It explains the B9's role within NATO, considers its more limited use in the EU context, and describes the modus operandi it has adopted. The paper concludes with an outlook into the near future for the B9 and presents recommendations as to how the format could be used to further advance regional security cooperation in the interest of the member countries and NATO as a whole.

The B9's Inception

The B9 was launched at the initiative of Romania's President Klaus Iohannis and Poland's President Andrzej Duda at the High-Level Meeting of the States from Central and Eastern Europe in Bucharest in 2015. Its members are Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. They aim for the B9 to be a multilevel platform to coordinate their positions and to exchange views on matters of common interest, including security, defense, and energy security.

The B9's principal *raison d'être* is to increase the security of NATO's eastern flank. These countries that are nearest to Russia see the war in Ukraine as a manifestation of the Kremlin's renewed geopolitical aspirations pursued by military means. For years they have been worried about the implications of Russia's aggression toward its neighbors for their security and for the long-term stability of the broader region. This goes back to at least 2007 and President Vladimir Putin's notorious speech at the Munich Security Conference, in which he accused the United States and NATO of undermining global stability. These countries' concern grew with Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and it culminated with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These developments have had deep consequences for the security and stability of Central and Eastern Europe, mixing the resurgence of Russia's armed aggression and its utilization of hybrid warfare against several countries in the region that were once part of the Soviet-controlled eastern bloc.

As a result, the CEE countries have sought to take robust action to address the security challenges posed by Russia, and to build a more stable and cooperative security environment at the bilateral, regional, and supra-regional (that is, EU and NATO) levels. The B9 was established based on two complementary rationales. The strategic rationale was to enhance the collective security of the nine countries and to safeguard their interests

through strategic deterrence. The political rationale was to build and accumulate political capital within NATO among like-minded CEE countries before the alliance's 2016 summit in Warsaw. The aim was to foster a stronger and more united stance among these countries that would enable them to pursue an ambitious CEE-centric agenda at the summit. That summit was the second one after Russia's first aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014. While the 2014 summit in Wales had focused on assurance measures, burden-sharing and improvement of the readiness of allied armed forces, the Warsaw one was landmark for strengthening and modernizing NATO's deterrence and defense posture. A key specific commitment was made to enhance collective defense by increasing the alliance's forward presence on the eastern flank in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, as well as by developing a tailored forward presence in Bulgaria and Romania.¹ Thus, six B9 countries got more advanced and tangible forms of NATO commitments to their security. (Slovakia and Hungary got similar ones in 2022.)

The B9 and NATO

The B9 is a reactive organization in the sense that it might never have been formed without the military manifestation of Russia's geopolitical objectives. Yet, it can also be seen as a proactive initiative with its own agenda. The original expectation of the nine countries was that Russia's aggression would increase after the events of 2014—an expectation that was not fully shared within NATO as many members held on to the alliance's long-term dual-track approach combining deterrence and dialogue with Moscow. That never was the case for the B9 countries, so they felt vindicated in their stance after Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This left the B9 well positioned to advocate for its priorities at the NATO level.

The B9 currently has several priorities inside the alliance, including:

- o Defense spending—the B9 sees financial allocations to defense projects as crucial to address the risks associated with Russia.
- o Resilience—in the B9's understanding building resilience in Central and Eastern Europe is the key factor in countering hybrid threats.
- o Strategic deterrence—the B9 has been instrumental in shaping NATO's strategic deterrence on its eastern flank from its early days by advocating for more robust allied military presence there.

NATO's official policy is based on the "360 degrees" approach to security, meaning the alliance must be able to respond to threats from any direction. In practice, though, its traditional priorities have been the south (from Africa to the Middle East) and the east (mostly Russia-centric challenges). The B9 countries want NATO to concentrate on Russia more and primarily, for several reasons. They argue that, on the basis of the events over the last decade or longer, Russia is the most acute and direct threat to European security and stability. The concerns of the B9 countries about Russia extend to its use of hybrid warfare tactics, including disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and the use of non-state actors to achieve its objectives in Central and Eastern Europe.

By joining forces in the B9, these countries have sought avenues to amplify their voice and boost their influence within NATO. The format has given them an institutionally flexible platform to coordinate their efforts, to exchange information, and to devise strategies to realize their ambition for building up defense capability.

Since its creation, the B9 has gained recognition as a regional platform for security policy-oriented coordination and consultation, making it the most prominent framework within the realm of security cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. It has built a considerably more compelling track record of accomplishments in the security sphere than two other main regional platforms: the Visegrád Four and the Three Seas Initiative. (See boxes.)

In response to the events of 2014, NATO undertook various measures to adapt and strengthen its defense capabilities. A key one was to increase defense spending via the Defense Investment Pledge (decided at the 2014 Wales summit). The allies decided to allocate more resources to defense to ensure NATO's readiness and preparedness. Another crucial step was the forward deployment of allied troops to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland (decided at the 2016 Warsaw summit). This initiative, known as Enhanced Forward Presence, aims to enhance deterrence and to provide reassurance to these countries.² By stationing troops there NATO sought to demonstrate its commitment to the security of its eastern flank and send a clear message to potential adversaries. In 2016, NATO also increased its presence in the Black Sea through the Tailored Forward Presence concept.³ This initiative aims to improve situational awareness, enhance maritime security, and strengthen cooperation with regional partners. By bolstering its presence in the Black Sea region, NATO sought to ensure stability and deter any potential threats in this strategically important area. In addition, in 2016, NATO also focused on boosting its rapid reaction capabilities through the enhanced NATO Response Forces.⁴ This serves as a highly responsive and flexible force capable of rapid deployment, which enables NATO to swiftly address emerging security challenges. This enhanced rapid-reaction capability allows NATO to effectively respond to various scenarios and maintain a credible deterrent posture.

By the time of Russia's full invasion into Ukraine in 2022, the B9 had become a forum accommodating the highest levels of political participation for discussing regional security matters.

While the CEE countries welcomed these steps, they had mixed perceptions regarding their overall impact. Although they demonstrated NATO's commitment to collective security and provided reassurance to some CEE countries, there were also concerns about the insufficiency of these steps, especially if perceived through the prism of Russia's increasing aggression.

By the time of Russia's full invasion into Ukraine in 2022, the B9 had become a forum accommodating the highest levels of political participation for discussing regional security matters. The high-level participation of NATO leaders—including those of the leading transatlantic powers, like Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States—in its meetings was a clear sign that they preferred this format for addressing the leaders of Central and Eastern Europe. There had been numerous meetings between the B9 group and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, US President Joe Biden, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and European Commission President

Ursula Von der Leyen. The B9 hosted several coordination meetings in 2021, which was an important year for NATO's adaptation process.

NATO adaptation refers to the alliance's ongoing efforts to adjust its way of operating to changing global security challenges and thus to maximize its relevance as a key player in international security. In recent years, the milestones of this process were reached during different NATO summits. At the Brussels summit in June 2021, alliance leaders agreed on a wide range of topics to address its security challenges:

- o Deepening political consultation among allies.

Box 1. The Visegrád Four

The most visible regional format in Central and Eastern Europe is the Visegrád Group (V4), a cultural and political regional cooperation format between Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia that was created in 1991. It aims to advance their cooperation in military, economic, cultural, and energy affairs. The V4 is largely not institutionalized but it has been relatively formalized.

The V4 has had a defense cooperation program since 2014 when its ministers of defense signed the group's first defense cooperation strategy, Long Term Vision of the Visegrád Countries on Deepening Defense Cooperation.* The strategy was reasonably ambitious but it is widely perceived as insufficiently executed. However, it did not set a particular strategic vision that would place V4 policy in the context of the overall EU or NATO policy with regard to Russia or any other challenge and threat.

V4 defense cooperation has focused on inward-looking priorities. It has sought avenues for the joint acquisition of defense systems, including some at the high end of the spectrum, like fighter jets, some in the middle of the spectrum, like armored personnel carriers, and some at the low end of the spectrum like joint modernization of helicopters. Yet to date, a joint acquisition of systems or services that would be used by the four countries has not yet occurred. This has been a missed opportunity for the V4 countries to enhance their defense capabilities and to strengthen their collective security.

The overarching reason for the lack of success rests in the difficulty overcoming national interests in common acquisition projects. While joint procurement looks attractive on paper, the V4 countries tend to prioritize national procurement goals along their respective defense planning circles and priorities. They also tend to use major defense procurements to solidify or enhance relations with other strategic and emerging economic partners: for Czechia, France; for Hungary, Germany; for Poland, the United States; and for Slovakia, Israel and the Nordic countries. Differing political priorities and different capability priorities place an extra handicap on the collaborative procurement or development projects. V4 defense cooperation is no exception and the condition for project acquisitions are yet to emerge.

- o Strengthening deterrence and defense, predominantly with the implementation of the NATO 2030 agenda and the adaptation of NATO's military posture.
- o Enhancing resilience, including through the development of a NATO resilience initiative and the establishment of a new Cyber Defense Policy Framework.
- o Sharpening the alliance's technological edge, including through a NATO Innovation Fund and a new Emerging and Disruptive Technologies Task Force.
- o Addressing climate change as a security challenge, including through the development of a NATO Climate Security Action Plan.⁵

There have been two cases in which the V4 format has been somewhat successful: the V4 EU Battlegroup and common air-patrolling agreements between Slovakia and all other V4 members.

The V4 EU battlegroup is a military battlegroup under the leadership of Poland and with the participation of the other three countries. EU battlegroups are multinational units that are part of EU's military rapid-reaction capacity to emerging crises and conflicts. The battlegroup is not a permanent structure; it is only declared available for EU to be used in case of need and consensus to conduct various lower-intensity military operations. (None of the EU battlegroups have ever been deployed.) The 3,700-strong V4 battlegroup was formed in 2011, and it was placed on standby in the first half of 2016 and then in 2019 and 2023. It is ready for rapid deployment in crisis-management operations. It was reinforced by Croatia in 2019. As a symbolic gesture toward Ukraine, 19 of the country's troops joined the battlegroup in 2016. The cyclical formation of the battlegroup is the most visible result of V4 defense cooperation. It is more than a standalone V4 entity; it acts as the group's contribution to the EU crisis management toolkit.

The existence of common air-patrolling agreements between Slovakia and the other V4 countries is often considered a fruit of V4 cooperation; however, legally and practically they are more a set of bilateral agreements aiming to close Slovakia's fighter-jet capability gap until the country completes its acquisition program of US F-16s. The agreements came into existence gradually (with Czechia in 2017, with Poland in 2022, and with Hungary in 2024) and not necessarily as a result of a set V4 policy priority or deliverable. The fact that Slovakia had not modernized its fleet of fighter jets and consecutively donated it entirely to Ukraine also significantly contributed to the need for common air-patrolling arrangements.

Overall, therefore, V4 defense cooperation policy is more project-oriented and aimed to boost the defense capacities of the four countries, and it is less ambitious when it comes to shaping policies to react to external threats and challenges at the NATO level.

* *Visegrád Group*, Long Term Vision of the Visegrád Countries on Deepening Defense Cooperation, March 14, 2014.

The first three topics are high priorities in the national security policy of most B9 countries. The first is also what the B9 seeks to do on a smaller scale among about one-third of the alliance membership. The second places special emphasis on the overarching challenge posed by Russia. And on the third, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been successfully spearheading the resilience and cyber agenda. The last two priorities are not generally seen by CEE countries as equally important, which is reflected in their relatively modest place in each of these countries' security strategy or strategic communications.

In the past couple of years, the B9 format for coordination has helped shape some of the key policy developments in European security.

Most of the work on NATO's new Strategic Concept also took place in 2021. Adopted in 2022, this is the principal guiding document that outlines the alliance's approach to promoting security and ensuring its defense.⁶ It is a broad framework that in essence presents NATO's vision, principles, objectives, and provides guidance on how it should adapt to the changing security environment. It aims to strike a balance between the alliance's three long-standing core tasks: collective defense, cooperative security (that is, reaching out beyond NATO) and crisis management (for example, fighting terrorism and piracy). It builds on the NATO 2030 Agenda⁷ by making the alliance more effective and more efficient through greater political cohesion. Importantly to Central and Eastern Europe and the B9, this concept reprioritized collective defense as the most prominent core task of the alliance.

In the past couple of years, the B9 format for coordination has helped shape some of the key policy developments in European security. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept clearly reflects the elevated position of topics and priorities that had been promoted by the B9 nations. Whether it is the renewed emphasis on territorial defense and deterrence or the solidification of resilience building within NATO, the B9 played a significant part in placing these topics at the top of the alliance's hierarchy of priorities. In 2019, the B9 Joint Assessment for Common Understanding was organized, a project bringing together representatives of governments and research institutions from each of the B9 countries and beyond, organized and coordinated by the Warsaw Institute in conjunction with the Polish government.⁸ Its objective was to integrate expert analyses and to better understand each B9 country's perspective on current security threats. The result of the assessment was a B9 list of priorities to be advocated at NATO level, aggregating key items in the national security strategies of the group's members. Resilience, territorial defense, neighborhood stabilization, and countering a wide array of hybrid threats were central to the national security strategies of Poland (2020), Romania (2020), Slovakia (2021), Estonia (2017), and Latvia (2019).⁹ These issues had been integral to the national security thinking of the B9 countries within their state apparatus and expert community. B9 diplomacy worked to ensure they would become key elements of NATO strategy. This has been gradually happening and was enhanced after Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in 2022. And, as a result of growing awareness of the concerns of B9 countries, NATO has established the Center of excellence for strategic communication in Riga in 2014 and in 2018 tasked the Tallin-based Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence with the coordination of education and training solutions in cyber defense for all NATO bodies.

Although the full invasion vindicates the CEE voices that warned that weakness and appeasement would only invite more Russian aggression, it also led the B9 to adapt its goals. Since February 2022, the B9 priority has been not only

Box 2. The Three Seas Initiative

Launched in 2015, the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is a regional cooperation initiative to primarily promote connectivity among 13 countries in the regions of the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black seas. It includes geopolitical, economic, and energy security aspects that are essential for the security interests of Central and Eastern Europe. However, the cooperation in the TSI is more oriented to development and modernization, with the security element being a supportive factor, stemming from the fact that more ambitious energy and infrastructure projects (such as oil and gas terminals or pipeline interconnectors) lower the dependence of the TSI countries on external actors, most directly Russia. Like the B9, the TSI is essentially an intergovernmental initiative and functions on a flexible basis of meetings and agenda setting. It too reflects the participating countries' aspirations to play a more proactive role in shaping the region's future.

Beyond their different focus (economy for the TSI and security for the B9), there is also a different degree of coherence between the two formats. The engagement of the states in the TSI is not of equal depth and dedication, with some being more convinced of the added value that it provides than others. This is seen in the number and scope of projects developed within the TSI framework and different countries' involvement in them. For example, Slovakia is engaged in only three smaller projects, Slovenia works on six projects across different economic sectors, and Croatia and Hungary participate in at least 15 diverse projects. In the B9 where member states have a more equal level of engagement and more similar views about future priorities, with Hungary an outlier with regard to the way of addressing Russia. The two formats also differ in their strategic implications. The TSI is especially is mostly oriented to offering Europe and the United States an alternative engagement platform in Central and Eastern Europe to China's (lately rather unsuccessful) Belt and Road Initiative, while the B9 is mostly about deterring and countering Russia.

to enhance NATO's eastern flank but also to ensure Ukraine's survival as an independent state and to support the idea of its closer integration into future security architecture of the region, including NATO membership.

While the B9 countries are developing a new wave of shared priorities in defense and deterrence (enhanced air defense of the eastern flank, and more NATO military equipment and troops to be stationed in frontline states), for now it seems that the alliance has delivered largely on all of their earlier appeals. NATO's swift introduction of Enhanced Vigilance Activities in 2022¹⁰—which has essentially broadened Enhanced Forward Presence to all the B9 countries, except Czechia, and they today host allied multinational battlegroups—was a reaction to calls from Central and Eastern Europe for a more robust allied deterrence against Russia.

At the same time, the center of gravity of security cooperation in the region has significantly shifted toward supporting Ukraine politically, financially, and militarily. The Ramstein format, officially known as the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, has emerged as a practical solution to effectively address these needs. The B9 countries strongly support its mission, including for some of them through bilateral military assistance: Estonia, Latvia,

Poland, and Slovakia are among the leading donors of military aid to Ukraine. Other B9 countries followed suit, with the exception of Hungary, which has refrain from providing lethal military assistance to Ukraine. The B9 countries have individually provided military capabilities including fighter jets, ground-based air defense system, infantry fighting vehicles, howitzers, and multiple-rocket launchers. However, there has to date been no joint B9 joint package of military equipment for Ukraine, just as at the NATO level.

The B9 and the EU

The B9 format is less used by its countries in relation to decision-making processes at the EU level. In the process of the adoption of the EU Strategic Compass in 2022,¹¹ they advocated similar priorities as those identified in the NATO Strategic Concept process that same year; namely, emphasis on resilience building as a common task and territorial defense as the main task. But they did not use the B9 format widely to coordinate at the EU level, although the adoption timelines for the two documents were similar.

The main reason for this likely rests in the fact that the B9 did not establish itself equally visibly in the EU and NATO, since its motivating factor—Russia's aggression—required primarily a military response. While the EU does several things that are relevant to the B9 countries, NATO is the institution best suited to their priority of enhancing strategic deterrence since, as a collective security alliance, it is well equipped to address and coordinate efforts in this area.

One key element that differentiates between EU and NATO from the CEE security perspective is the presence and role of the United States in the latter. Washington is the key enabler of NATO and the crucially important capacity provider for any credible defense policy in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the United States plays a central role in any credible, whether conventional or nuclear, deterrence scenario vis-à-vis Russia. With an active military presence in six of the B9 countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania), it is uniquely positioned as a stakeholder in regional security and thus for the B9. The United States also plays a crucial role in building interoperability among European militaries and is key enabler of credible defense planning within NATO.

However, certain B9 priorities, such as enhancing societal resilience and addressing hybrid threats, could also be effectively addressed at the EU level. These issues require a comprehensive and multifaceted approach and the EU, with its focus on regional cooperation and integration, can play a significant role in tackling them. Enhancing societal resilience involves strengthening the ability of societies to withstand and recover from various challenges, including cyberattacks, terrorist threats, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion. Addressing hybrid threats, which involve a combination of conventional and unconventional tactics, is another area where EU-level cooperation can be beneficial. Sharing intelligence, coordinating responses, and implementing joint measures can help EU members effectively counter these complex threats. The EU's ability to bring together different stakeholders, including governments, law-enforcement agencies, and civil society, can contribute to a more comprehensive and coordinated approach.

A number of B9 countries have successfully used a whole-of-government approach for tackling hybrid threats. Estonia, having experienced cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, has taken steps to improve its cybersecurity and counter-disinformation efforts.¹² It has invested significantly in digital literacy education and awareness campaigns. Lithuania has placed a strong emphasis on strategic communication and media literacy to counter disinformation.¹³ It has implemented successful campaigns to enhance public awareness and resilience against false narratives. Latvia has taken steps to monitor and counter disinformation, particularly during election periods.¹⁴ Enhancing cybersecurity and countering information threats became integral components of its national security strategy. However, the B9 countries have not fully used this experience and potential to their advantage at the EU level and the flagship international cooperation projects in this area bear a NATO label; namely, the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence in Tallinn and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga.

One area where the B9 and the EU have been more aligned is the post-2022 sanctions against Russia. That was also the core reason behind European Commission President von der Leyen's participation in the B9 summit in Warsaw in 2022, just a day after the EU Council adopted a package of massive and targeted sanctions against Russia. The purpose of the summit was to discuss the security situation in Europe, particularly in light of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine, and the need for the B9 to deepen partnerships with Georgia, Finland, Sweden, Ukraine, the EU, and Asia-Pacific partners.

Differentiation in the B9

Although the sea change in the security environment since 2014 was felt around the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, it did so with somewhat different intensity. Until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the B9 countries were not completely unified in their stance toward it. While they largely share a sentiment of insecurity and of distrust of Russia, there were two levels of awareness and of ambition in responding to Moscow's aggression. Poland and the Baltic states started their adaptation to the new reality almost immediately and warned of the pitfalls of hoping Russia's aspirations could be managed through diplomacy, the other B9 members were more open to NATO's dual track approach to Russia could work. This dichotomy however largely disappeared in February 2022.

Hungary is the only B9 country that has been something of an outlier, as it wants to address Russia as a challenge rather than an obvious threat. Hungary's relationship with Russia is a rather controversial and complex one. The country has been criticized essentially by all its allies for its close ties with Russia. While Hungary's energy dependency on Russia is not unique in Europe, its political stances that often suit directly or indirectly Russian positions cause concerns within the EU and NATO. Most notably, Hungary has been accused of blocking EU sanctions against Russia and has opposed plans to grant more aid to Ukraine. It has promoted these positions in the B9 format, just like it has done at the EU, NATO, and V4 level. While Hungary's distinctive stance has been recognized and respected in the B9 format, its impact on the discussions and decisions within the group has been limited. For example, the June 2023 B9 summit led to the reaffirmed commitment of the group to Finland and

Sweden joining NATO, as well as to agreement to cooperate closely and support Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Moldova in countering Russia's destabilizing and malign influence.¹⁵ Hungary has not been enthusiastic about these two positions, but it did not prevent the B9 reaching these decisions and even publicly endorsed them.

The B9 Modus Operandi

Since its inception, the B9 has maintained a flexible modus operandi. It brings together government leaders and officials from various levels, ranging from presidents to ministers and national security advisors. Hosting the summits of heads of state is voluntary; so far they have been only held in Romania, Poland, and Slovakia, eight times since the B9's inception, with the most recent one being held in June 2023 in Slovakia. Ministerial meetings copy the NATO modality of defense and political formats (respectively attended by ministers of defense and ministers of foreign affairs). At the time of writing, there had been 11 ministerial meeting in these formats. These B9 meetings take place only when the need arises. The presidential ones are something of an exception, a pattern of biannual meetings having appeared with summits held in February and June each year, since 2018 almost always before NATO summits. The flexibility of the B9 format allows leaders to convene whenever there is a pressing matter that requires their attention. This ensures that discussions are held and decisions are made in a timely manner, without the constraints of rigid meeting schedules and procedures. There have been notable disagreements at times. Members have criticized Hungary's close ties with Russia and expressed concerns over these after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. There have been also disagreements over migration, with some members opposing the EU migration policies.

The B9 does not possess a permanent secretariat to provide administrative and substantive work for the organization, or to gather and prepare background information on various issues that can be used in its policy discussions. It appears the members do not see much value in having such a body and there is no sign that they will seek to create one in the foreseeable future. This absence of a dedicated administrative body allows for a more streamlined, almost informal decision-making process. Instead of relying on one, the B9 emphasizes direct communication and interaction between the participating leaders and decision-makers. This approach enables them to address issues promptly and efficiently, without bureaucratic hurdles.

In contrast to formats that have a fixed presidency or a rotating presidency system, the B9 does not have such a mechanism. This means that the responsibility of leading it is shared among the participating countries' delegations to the meetings. Presidential summits are prepared by the staff of the heads of state, while ministerial meetings are usually prepared under the supervision of the political directors of the foreign or defense ministries.

The B9 does not have a formal common strategy document or statement, nor a long-term cooperation plan. Instead, it operates on a more ad hoc basis, focusing on addressing immediate challenges and priorities as they arise. Similarly, between meetings the B9 produces joint letters to communicate its positions within NATO. This flexibility allows members to adapt their approaches and strategies based on evolving circumstances. While the

absence of a formal strategy may seem unconventional, it enables the B9 to swiftly respond to emerging security concerns and changing geopolitical dynamics.

The formulation of policy decisions by the B9 is primarily through meeting communiqués and statements. Decisions on these are reached through consensus rather than formal voting procedures, with national security priorities and country-specific positions taken into consideration. Statement and positions are the main policy outcomes of the B9, with the implementation of joint decisions done at the national or NATO levels, or both.

NATO operates on the principle of consensus, requiring all members to agree on a common position before making decisions, which means that all decisions are the expression of the collective will of all allies represented at the North Atlantic Council. The use of the B9 reflects the flexible nature of NATO where allies coordinate and create like-minded partnerships to spearhead different sets of agendas—in the case of the B9 to increase deterrence and defense on the eastern flank. However, the format does not duplicate NATO's official decision-making processes and structures. The nine countries always communicate and vote on the basis of national positions.

The B9 is not officially recognized, and would not be welcome, as a formal bloc or a caucus within NATO. This is because the allies have historically refrained from forming such formal sub-structures, partly as rivals could exploit this to divide NATO on some issues. However, the nine countries do consider the B9 as an informal caucus and the format has been repeatedly utilized for ambassadorial meetings before North Atlantic Council meetings. Interestingly, there are neither formal nor informal B9 meetings at the level of the national military representatives (loosely, the military equivalent is civilian ambassadors) of the B9 countries to NATO. This is most likely because the mainly political nature of B9 coordination does not require the integration of military leadership right away. Military authorities are key stakeholders in the implementation stage of defense and security policies, which is done mostly nationally, even if in coordination with fellow NATO members.

The Future of the B9

Looking ahead to the short-to-medium term, the B9 has several projects that it seeks to drive forward, focused on two key areas. The first is supporting Ukraine. The second is the further structural enhancement of their integration into NATO's functional assets, which implies addressing the weaker spots of NATO's defense and deterrence posture on its eastern flank by deploying more assets there (air defense units, mechanized and artillery units) and by creating conditions for their more efficient use (via enhanced military mobility and a more efficient system of enablement).

With regard to Ukraine, the B9 countries aim to strengthen ties with the country and support its development. This includes initiatives to enhance political, economic, and security cooperation between Ukraine and NATO members. Efforts are being made to provide assistance and support to the country in areas that are crucial for it to reach a high level of interoperability with NATO: defense reform, capacity building, and military training. While these are important elements of Ukraine's future defenses, there are numerous notable challenges ahead. Ukraine

is engaged in high-intensity warfare against a global military power with superiority in resources, and undertaking reforms has historically proved difficult for CEE countries even during peacetime. Besides fighting Russia on the battlefield, Ukraine will need to fight its internal enemy: corruption. And it remains to be seen whether the B9 countries (with their mixed record in this field) will prove to be of valuable assistance for Ukraine. In the area of capacity building, another challenge arises as a consequence of Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine: competition for defense capacities. Western countries face a challenge in arming Ukraine sufficiently while building up on their own arsenals with a defense market that does not seem to be fully adapted to a future of significantly increased demand with their current supply and delivery-time potential. While the B9 countries have provided significant military help to Ukraine, sustaining the required pace of assistance with their own resources might prove to be too big of challenge.

Irrespective of the B9's ongoing assistance to Ukraine, the overarching question is whether this is enough and sustainable.

B9 contributions could play a crucial role in strengthening Ukraine's defense capabilities and ensuring the successful provision of Western military support. The B9 countries, with Poland and Slovakia at the forefront, have stepped forward to offer their industrial capacities, know-how, and logistical support to help Ukraine repair and maintain its war-damaged military assets.¹⁶ And with the border states Poland, Romania, and Slovakia the most prominent, the B9 countries could play a vital role in the logistics of Western military support to the country. With their location and infrastructure, these countries can contribute to the efficient transportation of equipment and resources to Ukraine. In particular, Poland's well-developed transportation network makes it an ideal hub for the transportation of military supplies to Ukraine. Poland has shown a strong commitment to supporting its neighbor and has facilitated the logistics of Western military assistance.

Irrespective of the B9's ongoing assistance to Ukraine, the overarching question is whether this is enough and sustainable. There are signs that their assistance is decreasing in intensity. After its parliamentary elections in September 2023, Slovakia has adopted a model of assistance similar to Hungary's, and Czechia and the Baltic countries might soon reach their limit in terms of available capacity they can spare. With these limitations, the nature of B9 military support to Ukraine seems to be changing from the provision of capabilities to assistance in developing capabilities via training. A good example of this is the F-16 training program in Romania.¹⁷ This initiative of Romania and the Netherlands will bring to allied and Ukrainian armed forces to develop interoperability and improving conditions for joint operations. Another joint Polish-Ukrainian initiative to include B9 countries is the Joint Analysis, Training, and Education Centre.¹⁸ Hosted by Poland, it is designed to serve as a hub for the transfer of battlefield lessons learned from Ukraine to NATO and to transfer NATO standards into the Ukrainian military. The centre will be launched in the first half of 2024 with B9 countries likely joining its faculty at a later stage.

With regard to policy coordination priorities within NATO, the B9 will likely concentrate on their long-term aspiration for Central and Eastern Europe's greater integration into the alliance's key enabling infrastructure.

A notable flagship project for them is the expansion of the NATO-owned and -operated Central European Pipeline System (CEPS) into the region. This long-wished-for project's development would significantly contribute to

the energy security and resilience of the B9 countries as well as strengthen their ties with NATO. The CEPS is used to deliver fuel for air and ground vehicles mainly in Western Europe. It consists of over 5,000 kilometers of pipelines running through Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. It has not been extended to the territory of the countries that joined NATO after the end of the Cold War even though the alliance's threat assessment identifies Central and Eastern Europe as one of the regions most exposed to threats emanating from Russia. The Baltic and Black Sea countries have been strong advocates of the extension of the CEPS as part of its appeals to enhance NATO's posture in the region. By facilitating the transportation of energy resources, such as oil and gas, across Central and Eastern Europe, the extension would reduce the dependency of countries in the region on external suppliers and enhance regional cooperation. The CEPS's extension would also significantly boost the availability of petroleum products for eventual operational purposes in the context of the war in Ukraine. However, it would also involve significant financial costs that would have to be shared among all the NATO members as joint owners of the CEPS.

Besides the extension of the CEPS, the B9 countries will prioritize development projects aimed at boosting infrastructure, mobility, and host-nation capacities on the eastern flank in order to secure a considerably greater ability to host, move, and support NATO forces, including eventually during any conflict in the region.

Another project the B9 has been pushing is the transformation of NATO's multinational battlegroups hosted by the eastern flank countries from battalion-level to brigade-level units. Established as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence initiative, these play a crucial role in reinforcing deterrence and defense on the eastern flank. The battlegroups currently consist of battalion-sized units to which various NATO members contribute, and they rotate periodically to maintain a continuous allied military presence. While they have proven effective in enhancing regional security, the evolving security landscape demands a more robust and scalable approach. By scaling up the battlegroups into brigade-level units, NATO could significantly enhance its military presence and capabilities in the eastern flank countries. Brigade-sized formations possess greater operational flexibility and firepower, and they have the ability to conduct more complex military operations. This transformation would ensure a more credible response to potential security threats in the region.

The war in Ukraine has underscored the importance of a strong defense industry for national and collective security. It has demonstrated the vulnerabilities that arise when countries rely heavily on foreign suppliers for critical defense equipment and technology. By prioritizing defense industry capacity buildup, NATO can reduce its dependence on external sources and enhance its self-reliance in times of crisis. Trying to assist Ukraine efficiently in its defense efforts has also revealed the significance of defense industry cooperation and collaboration within the alliance. By pooling resources, expertise, and technology, NATO can better support Ukraine. This includes not only providing financial and technical assistance but also promoting joint research and development projects, sharing best practices, and facilitating the transfer of defense technologies. The B9 countries' geographical proximity not only to Ukraine but also to potential conflict zones in Belarus, Moldova, or territories of its allies is a compelling argument for the enhancement of their defense industry capabilities and capacities. The B9 must therefore prioritize the development of its member's defense sector to ensure readiness and ability to respond to any potential threats.

The B9 will also actively advocate for its priorities within NATO in order to enhance its capabilities and address the challenges posed by Russia's aggression in Ukraine. These priorities focus on critical areas such as enablement, military infrastructure development, and air and missile defense. One of the key priorities within NATO for the B9 is to support enablement (that is, the ability of allies to rapidly move troops and equipment in support of large-scale defense), with a particular focus on enhancing military mobility. Ensuring the quick and efficient movement of troops and equipment is crucial for effective deterrence, and the B9 will push for initiatives aimed at streamlining cross-border military transportation. This will involve improving infrastructure, removing bureaucratic barriers (likely involving EU regulations), and establishing standardized procedures, ensuring as rapid and seamless a movement of forces across the alliance as realistically possible.

The B9 emphasizes the necessity of allocating more funding for military infrastructure development on NATO's eastern flank. Enhancing infrastructure, such as air bases, ports, command centers, and logistical facilities would enable the much faster deployment and reinforcement of forces, ensuring a credible deterrence posture along the alliance's border with Russia.

The B9 will also continue to advocate for the establishment of a long-term NATO air and missile defense model—a complex layered system of air-defense assets from various allies located in threat hotspots within the territory of members—to address the existing loopholes in the alliance's defense architecture as the CEE countries do not have the necessary assets to protect themselves against Russian missiles. Recognizing the growing sophistication of air and missile threats, particularly from Russia, the B9 countries emphasize the need for a comprehensive and integrated defense system. This will involve enhancing NATO's early-warning capabilities, placing advanced missile-defense systems on the eastern flank, and strengthening cooperation among allies to effectively counter emerging threats.

Conclusion

The establishment of international cooperation platforms, in the form of institutions or organizations of various kinds, within the realm of security tends to be driven by the quest to prevent the resurrection of past insecurities and hostilities. The United Nations and the EU were created on the "ashes" of the Second World War, and NATO followed suit with a vision to maintain the newly achieved yet still fragile peace. The B9's inception to some extent followed this pattern. Since 2007, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to pursue its regional security interests through aggressive means ranging from non-kinetic (hybrid threats) to limited kinetic (Ukraine in 2014) to full-scale military ones (Ukraine since 2022). From the start, the overarching aim of the B9 has been to react to Russia's revisionist actions by accentuating the need for enhanced defense and deterrence on NATO's eastern flank.

To a considerable extent the B9 has been successful in this with the establishment of NATO's stronger footprint in Central and Eastern Europe in the form of a greater troop presence and new, more ambitious regional defense plans as well as commitment to supporting Ukraine in Russia's unprovoked war. Yet, Russia's demonstrated

determination to continue its war in Ukraine over the long term despite the costs clearly shows the need for NATO's long-term commitment to enhancing its defense and deterrence potential vis-à-vis Russia and especially in this region.

The B9's role in this process will remain the same: to advocate the need for a stronger NATO presence in region through troops, capabilities, exercises, and sound political commitments to each ally's security and stability. An area where the B9 could potentially increase its presence is in EU decision-making. The EU's role in regulations and its overall financial potential to support collaborative projects in resilience enhancement are things NATO is not in position to offer.

It is unlikely that the B9's modus operandi will significantly change in the foreseeable future. It has so far benefited from the flexibility in its operation and will likely maintain this model. As the B9 already enjoys great visibility and attracts greater attention from the political leaders of NATO and EU countries, it is likely that it will at least maintain its standing in the near future. And, with the continuation of the regional security trends of the past decade, it is also beyond doubt that the B9's goal of keeping the eastern flank at the forefront of NATO's priorities will remain as relevant as it is today.

Recommendations for Enhancing the B9

Building on its current record of cooperation and since security developments in the region are likely to further deteriorate with Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine, the B9 should focus on the following key areas to enhance its role and effectiveness.

First, given the crucial importance of the preservation of Ukraine as an independent and sovereign state, the B9 should continue to prioritize support for it, particularly in the areas where the B9 can assist Ukraine even without significant material military assistance, such as in defense and security-sector reform, capacity building, and military training. The B9 countries have already started to work with Ukraine on these issues, bilaterally or within NATO, but it is crucial that Ukraine is supported continuously as it wages an existential battle for self-preservation, which is in the utmost interest of Central and Eastern Europe.

Second, the B9 should advocate the further structural enhancement of Central and Eastern Europe's integration into NATO's functional assets. This could involve addressing the weaker spots of the alliance's defense and deterrence posture on its eastern flank by deploying more assets—such as air defense, mechanized, and artillery units—at a sufficient scale to credibly deter Russia.

Third, enhancing military mobility is of key importance. The B9 countries do not possess and will not possess in the foreseeable future, if ever, sufficient military capabilities to defend themselves against Russia, should NATO's deterrence ever fail for any reason. This highlights the importance of conditions that would enable speedy and efficient troops reinforcement from the other parts of the alliance. To that end, the B9 should continue to

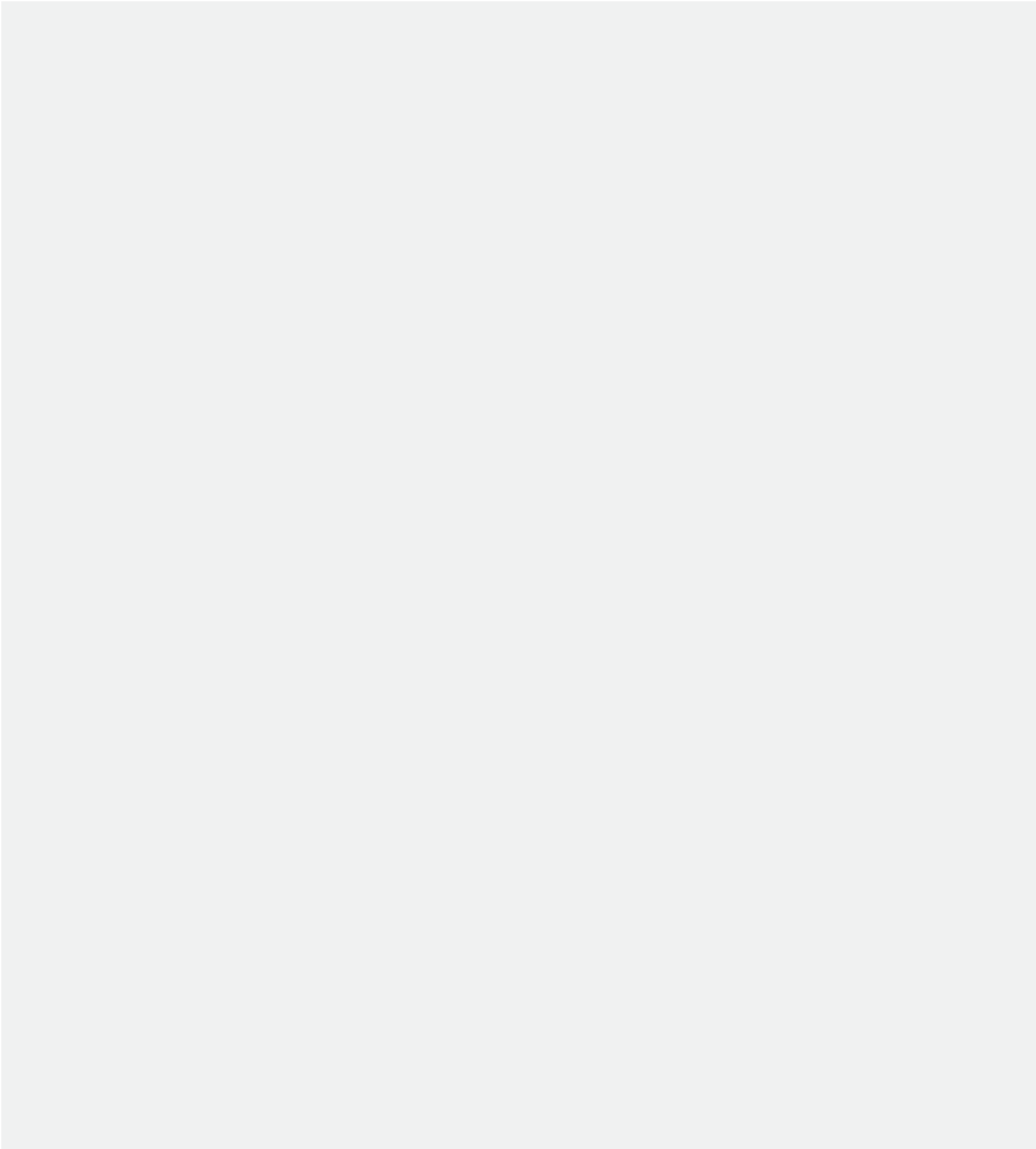
emphasize not only the importance but also the necessity of allocating more funding for military infrastructure development on the eastern flank. This effort should be made at all levels: national (investments), EU (further efforts in boosting military mobility via legislative changes and grants), and NATO (new plans and concepts for host-country support and new contingency plans). As a result of this, air bases, ports, command centers, and logistical facilities would be better suited to enable the potential deployment and reinforcement needs in Central and Eastern Europe.

Moreover, the B9 should increase its efforts in advocating the establishment of a long-term NATO air and missile defense model, involving a complex layered system of air-defense assets from various allies located in threat hotspots within the territory of members. This is not entirely new but it is still needed as NATO's current adaptation to the current threat picture in relation to Russia is clearly insufficient.

The B9's future cooperation should also aim to enhance societal resilience and to tackle hybrid threats, which could be effectively addressed at the EU level. This requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, and the EU, with its focus on pan-European regulatory and legislative measures, can play a significant role with regard to these challenges. The fact that the B9 format has not yet sought to embark on this path is probably its most obvious missed opportunity since its creation.

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