

A Battle Group For Eastern Europe

by **Richard T. Ritenbaugh**

Forerunner, "WorldWatch," May-June 2011

Visegrád is certainly not a household name in the United States—and likely nowhere else outside of Europe. It is the name of a medieval castle and its surrounding town situated in what is now Hungary, where two fourteenth-century meetings were held among the monarchs of the kingdoms of Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia. In the 1300s, Visegrád was the royal seat of Hungary, and in both 1335 and 1338, King Charles I hosted the Bohemian king, John of Luxembourg, and the Polish king, Casimir III, at his castle to hammer out a peace among the three kingdoms and to secure their alliance against Habsburg Austria.

This tidbit of Eastern European history was mere trivia until the late twentieth century, when the name of the alliance, the Visegrád Three, was revived by the modern nations of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Leaders of these states met in Visegrád in February 1991 to band together to enhance their economies and their chances of joining the European Union (EU). Later, after Czechoslovakia dissolved in 1993, forming the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the group became known as the Visegrád Group or the Visegrád Four (V4). All four nations were accepted into the EU in 2004.

Until 2011, the Visegrád Group concentrated on economic growth and cooperation, and out of the stagnation of their former Communist systems have arisen vibrant free-market economies. Together, their 65 million people now comprise Europe's seventh-largest economy and the world's thirteenth-largest. While the citizens of these four nations may not have the per capita incomes of some of their wealthy neighbors to the west, both the United Nations and the World Bank consider them highly developed and high-income states.

Now that they have achieved a modicum of economic prosperity, the Group is moving forward. On May 12, 2011, the Visegrád Group announced that its four nations are forming a "battle group," which will be ready by the first half of 2016 and be commanded by Poland. In addition, it will be an independent force, that is, not under the authority of NATO. However, beginning in 2013, the four countries will participate together in regular military exercises with the support of the NATO Response Force.

What would make these V4 nations—Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary—take such independent action? Two major factors—one constant, the other ever-changing—have forced them to act on their own initiative to take on the costly burden of militarization during an economic downturn.

The first factor is geography. The Visegrád nations are tightly wedged between European powerhouse Germany to the west and a resurgent Russia on the east. Poland, especially, has seen armies from both east and west transit and fight on its wide plains for centuries, so it is always well aware that it has few natural impediments to its stronger neighbors' armed forces. Like Poland, the other states of the V4, despite their more rugged terrain, have long histories of being the bloody buffer zones between hostile major powers.

The second factor, which makes the first relevant, is the flow of recent trends within Europe. From its low days after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has significantly grown in influence among its former satellite states like Belarus and Ukraine. This can easily be seen in its successful 2008 campaign against Georgia. With its energy wealth to back it, Moscow is suddenly a frightening bogeyman again.

This growing concern to the east is not helped by events in the west. The economic woes of just about every EU nation except Germany have diminished the luster of further economic integration, particularly joining the Eurozone. Moreover, the plight of the EU has had the effect of strengthening the V4 nations' other historical nemesis, Germany. It would be an understatement to say that they are uneasy with the idea of having to take orders from Berlin. It is also possible that the V4 nations view their new battle group as a wise precaution should the EU fracture under the strains of mounting debt and almost certain future defaults by one or more of its member states.

Finally, the Visegrád Group obviously questions NATO's ability to defend it from Russian or any other power's aggression. The new NATO strategic concept, publicized in the last quarter of 2010, indicates that the United States, stretched thin by its handful of ongoing wars, is ratcheting back its commitment to European security. Under the new plan, should Poland come under attack across the North European Plain, the U.S. would send only one brigade to defend it. Aggravating this is the pitiful state of European military forces after more than six decades of reliance on American might.

The V4 nations are not alone in their pessimism. Since 2008, a Nordic Battle Group, consisting of a few thousand troops from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Ireland, and Estonia, has also been active. These northern nations also fear the rising strength of Germany and Russia, the instability of the EU, and the distraction of America by its economic and military crises. Clearly, these states believe that regional military alliances, as weak as they are at present, will provide a framework for larger defense forces just in case their fears become realities.

There are already signs that the Visegrád Group is seeking to expand its alliance southward to Romania and Bulgaria, and perhaps it will also make overtures northward to Lithuania and Latvia (or these Baltic countries could join the Nordic Battle Group). In any event, the nations of Eastern Europe are nervous enough to form a sub-alliance against the instability around them. Could this be the formation of an eastern "foot and toes" of the final kingdom of Nebuchnezzar's great image, as mentioned in Daniel 2:40-43? Time will tell, yet even if it is not, these new alliances presage a break with the familiar post-Cold War pattern and hint that major instability lies just over the horizon.