

NATO ENCIRCLEMENT OF RUSSIA. The Strategic Role of the “Visegrad Four”: Poland, Hungary Czech Republic, Slovakia

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In May 2012, Chicago is to host the NATO summit. The alliance is facing the task of improving the relations within the bloc and restructuring its strategy taking into account the current crisis tendencies, which have gripped the Western world and the global challenges the West is facing. With mass media focusing on the events on the Middle East and North Africa, a threat of war against Iran and Afghanistan, Libya's post war instability, the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian crisis, Brussels has a lot to consider. In its turn, Poland is also preparing to submit its ideas and proposals at the coming summit in Chicago.

In particular, in its foreign policy for 2012-2016 Poland pays a special attention to the Visegrad Group or the Visegrad Four (V4) (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia), a military and political bloc, which was established in 1991. **When V4 signed its joint declaration on striving for their European integration, they clearly defined the political and ideological border-line where they planned to “hold back” Russia.** In May 2011, the group announced plans to set up a new combat unit under the command of Poland, which was to grow into a full-fledged military and political mechanism by 2016. Formally this mechanism is expected to have the authorities which are separate from NATO.

Already in 2013, the Visegrad Group plans to take part in the NATO Response Force military exercises. It is very important for Poland to unite the countries of the Four around itself, considering that in the second half of 2012 Poland will chair this organization. **Warsaw wants to continue acting as the regional pole of power, consolidating the countries of the Eastern Europe and the Baltic region.** Poland and the Baltic states have tight allied relations but Warsaw looks into the future and does not rule out that Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia will join the Visegrad Group (B 4+ format).

In April 2012, the Polish authorities organized a meeting with the Baltic allies in order to discuss this idea and to work out a common view of the strategic situation in the region. While Tallinn and Riga are willing to participate Vilnius with its attempts of “lithuanization” of Lithuanian Poles is spoiling the party. Lithuania's president Dalia Grybauskaitė ignored the meeting of her Baltic counterparts with the Polish president. **Reportedly, Poland hinted to Lithuania quite directly that if the Lithuanian authorities did not reconsider their policy with regard to the Polish minority in Lithuania, Warsaw would revise its position regarding the support of NATO's mission on protection of the Baltic States' air space.**

Meanwhile the Baltic States are eyeing Scandinavia to build a North-South geopolitical axis instead of an East-West axis. Polish experts regularly recommend the government not to forget about Scandinavia and to strive for the creation of a “geopolitical bridge” between Poland and Sweden. Poland is the regional leader in Eastern Europe. Sweden is the leading Scandinavian power. The Baltic States, sandwiched between Swedes and Poles, were destined to rely on Warsaw. But Lithuania wants to depend on Poland less than on anyone else. Vilnius and Warsaw look at the history of the Polish-Lithuanian relations from different positions. Poles regard the period of the unification of Lithuania and Poland as the peak of the geopolitical power of the Polish State, while Lithuanians consider that epoch to be the time of total Polish domination in everything from the language to the legislation.

For Poland Lithuania is the most important of all the Baltic States. In the 1920-s, the supporters of the Polish statesman Jozef Pilsudski tried to get control over Lithuania and to create a puppet state – the Republic of Central Lithuania (the rebellion of General Zeligowski). The Republic of Central Lithuania included also a part of Belarus and was to form a strong buffer state between Poland and the USSR. But today there is coolness between Lithuanians and Poles. Lithuanians are trying to make Lithuanian Poles forget their “Imperial ambitions”. In their turn, Lithuanian Poles consider Poland to be a stronger state than Lithuania and don’t want to give up their Polish ways. As a result the idea of “B 4+” is still only an idea.

As for V4, these countries do not have any serious contradictions. This is proved by a recent declaration (“Responsibility for a strong NATO”), in which members of the Visegrad group pledged to contribute to the strengthening of NATO’s defense capacity. The four states have declared they would not withdraw their troops from Afghanistan earlier than the term which was officially set, sticking to the principle “together-in – together-out”. The group has also supported the plans of the US administration on deployment of the components of the anti-missile system and spoken for the expansion of the North-Atlantic alliance by admitting the states, which membership will contribute to a stronger defense capacity of the bloc.

It is not difficult to guess what those states are. First of all it is Ukraine. It is not a coincidence that the Visegrad group issued its joint declaration on the eve of the Chicago summit. Ukraine’s President Viktor Yanukovich has already been invited to attend this event and **Poland is acting as the main supporter of Ukraine in the EU and NATO. Warsaw does not mind Georgia’s entry to NATO either,** but the problem of the republic’s “territorial integrity” is a serious obstacle on the way to its dream of European integration. Moldova’s prospects are also vague due to the same reason.

In the declaration the Visegrad Group pledges to stick to NATO’s strategy adopted in Lisbon in 2010. According to V4, during the Chicago summit it is desirable to adopt a “defense package”. In particular, the Four urges the intensification of cooperation within NATO in the field of joint military exercises in particular on the territory of the V4 countries.

According to NATO’s plans, which are to be discussed at the summit in Chicago in May, the countries of the former USSR, which surround Russia, must play the role of an “anaconda ring” pressing Russia and pushing it farther from its navigation routes: the Baltic States would block the access to the Baltic Sea, the scale of Russia’s presence on the Black Sea depends on Ukraine and Georgia; on land the Western direction would be blocked by Moldova and Ukraine and by Muscovites’ eternal opponent, which is Poland.

The essence of the North-Atlantic alliance as a military and political bloc has not changed since its establishment in 1949. NATO has not changed its goals regarding historical Russia which were set back in the beginning of the Cold War. These are only means of achieving these goals which are changing.

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