This paper examines the Visegrád Group’s (V4) defence cooperation within the wider context of EU defence cooperation. Analysis centres around explaining the V4’s place in these broader developments and how EU policies have interacted with the V4’s attempts at increasing their defence cooperation. Defence cooperation initiatives are conceptualised as an effort to manage and reverse declining European military power.

The analysis follows a narrative form, theoretically informed by neoclassical realism to detail and explain the most important factors propelling closer defence cooperation at the European and V4 level. Whilst also explaining intervening factors which have hampered these efforts. These factors are identified and interpreted through neoclassical realism using multi-layered analysis. Analysis follows a narrative centred around several periodic crises which have created “perceptual shocks,” propelling cooperation as a response to further declining capabilities. These include the Balkans crisis (1992), the financial crisis (2008), and Russia’s annexation of Crimea (2015).

The paper shows that these crises propelled EU and V4 defence cooperation, but with variable success. A key obstacle for EU cooperation was the primacy of national interests in defence cooperation, which in turn hampered successful participation in EU initiatives. The V4 struggled to enact significant cooperation because its members tended to prioritise political cooperation at the expense of defence planning. Ultimately it concludes that managing declining power is a gradual and often inconsistent process, but that EU initiatives are moving in the right direction.