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Rethinking NATO engagement in the Western Balkans

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Recently NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recognized Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as a possible frontier for Russian activities following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹ These activities, best illustrated by the threat from the Russian ambassador to Sarajevo of a Ukrainian scenario should BiH seek NATO membership, raises an important question: why is BiH of particular importance to the Euro-Atlantic Alliance? First, the Western Balkans is unfinished business for NATO and for countries in the region that have recognized NATO integration as a strategic goal. Second, other actors, primarily Russia and China, have established interests that compete with NATO's engagement in the Western Balkans. Third, the interests of these external actors undermine Euro-Atlantic security on the eastern flank. As a result, there are benefits for NATO in increasing cooperation with BiH and the Western Balkans in order to prevent the possible return of conflict to the region.

Competing interests in the Western Balkans

In the two-decade long NATO integration process, only three out of six countries of the Western Balkans have become NATO members. Whereas Serbia has opted for military neutrality, BiH and Kosovo have recognized Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic objective.

The Alliance sees the Western Balkans as central to a free and peaceful Europe, and the 2010 NATO Strategic concept states the Allies' intention to "facilitate the

Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans, with the aim to ensure lasting peace and stability".² However, the slow integration process, the shifting priorities of the United States (US) administrations, and the lack of a strategic engagement policy by the European Union (EU) in the Western Balkans have allowed Russia and China to step into the breach and entrench their presence in the region.³

In competing with NATO, Russia and China have adopted different approaches. Russia has sought to permeate the region on the premises of a unified form of nationalism underpinned by an imperialistic vision of uniting Slavic and Orthodox people. This approach challenges Euro-Atlantic integration as the guiding principle for the regional order and has opened the door to greater competition.⁴ China has also entered the region, by investing in massive infrastructure projects.⁵ Its free-of-conditionality projects burden Western Balkan economies and drive them further away from the reforms necessary for Euro-Atlantic integration by fostering less rule of law, less transparency, and more corruption.⁶ As such, the Rus-

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1 "Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg previewing the extraordinary Summit of NATO Heads of State and Government", *NATO Press Release*, 23 March 2022.

2 NATO, "Active engagement, modern defence – Strategic Concept for the defence and security of the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization", Lisbon, November 2010, p.31.

3 V. Zeneli, "Dancing in the dark: the West, China and Russia in the Western Balkans", Marshall Center, October 2020.

4 S. Secieru, "Russia in the Western Balkans", EUISS, 2 July 2019, pp.1-8.

5 I. Hope, "The Western Balkans and the revenge of history", *Research Paper* No.142, NATO Defense College, Rome, 2017, pp.4-6.

6 A. Krstinovska, "China's aid in the Western Balkans: supporting development, undermining good governance", *Policy Paper*, Association for International Affairs (AMO), Prague, 2022.

sian and Chinese approaches have wide-ranging activities in BiH, Serbia, Montenegro and other countries across the energy, military, infrastructure and political domains.

Russian interference

Russia's presence in the region is felt through its military and security expenditure. So far, Serbia has acquired MiG fighter jets, Pantsir-S1 anti-aircraft systems and Kornet anti-tank guided missiles. In return, Russia has donated tanks and combat vehicles to Belgrade. These strengthening ties have culminated in the opening of a Russian office within the Serbian Ministry of Defence, and in increasing joint military exercises between the two countries – 96 in 2019 alone.⁷ In BiH, Republika Srpska (RS) – one of the two entities established under the Dayton Peace Accords (DPA)⁸ – has had its police force trained by Russian forces, and the entity government has been engaged in procuring Russian military equipment.⁹

In the energy sector, Russia has made significant strategic acquisitions. Indeed, Gazprom Neft has acquired

Bringing BiH into NATO would contribute to resolving the unfinished business of integrating the Western Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture

NIS, the biggest oil and gas company in Serbia. It has also secured controlling ownership of Gastrans, the company operating the Serbian Stream pipeline system, part of TurkStream.¹⁰ In BiH, Russia's state oil company Zarubezhneft has bought the major oil refinery in RS, the lu-

bricant-manufacturing Modrice and fuel retailer Petrol. These acquisitions, with the newly built TurkStream pipeline, have positioned Russia for easy deployment of the gas weapon into neighbouring markets, especially in BiH.¹¹

It is in the political domain, however, that Russian actions exert most disruption in the Western Balkans. In an effort to hinder the remaining countries' Euro-Atlantic integration, Moscow has backed ultranationalists across the region. In BiH, Milorad Dodik, the Serb

member of the tripartite presidency, has received full support in his efforts for RS to secede from BiH, while also obstructing progress with BiH's Membership Action Plan (MAP). In Montenegro, Russia orchestrated a failed *coup d'état* in 2016 in order to thwart the country's accession to NATO. In North Macedonia, Russia supported pro-Russian political forces in undermining the Prespa agreement – a prerequisite for NATO membership.

The lure of Chinese investments

China, on the other hand, has used the 17+1 framework under the Belt and Road initiative to engage with local leaders looking for ambitious infrastructure and defence projects. In Serbia, the total amount of Chinese funding has reached USD 11 billion. Some notable examples include the purchase of the Smederevo steel mill by HesteelGroup, and that of the Bor copper smelter by Zinjin Mining. Huawei has been leading the way in building the country's 5G network, while the Chinese military has recently delivered "Rainbow" CH-92A attack drones as well as the new FK-3 surface-to-air defence system, making Serbia the only European country to operate this system.¹² In Montenegro, the USD 1 billion Chinese loan for the Bar-Belgrade highway has left the country on the brink of default. In BiH, China has provided funding for projects such as the Stanari thermal power plant, the highly-contested Block 7 for the Tuzla thermal power plant and the Banja Luka-Prijedor highway.

While the Chinese footprint is mainly limited to economic investments, its recent actions have signalled a rapprochement with Russian political positions in the region.¹³ However, Russia's actions pose a greater risk to NATO than China's in the Western Balkans, because they exploit political, societal and ethnic divisions in order to curb public support for NATO membership, European integration and liberal Western institutions.¹⁴

BiH and the transatlantic Alliance

Russian activities have an institutional setup for disruption in BiH. The specificity of the DPA constitutional power-sharing agreement grants the entities veto power over state-level decisions in the country. This has enabled Russia to exploit Dodik's leadership in RS as an unique institutional lever to orchestrate security crises in the region and block any kind of Euro-Atlantic inte-

7 "Serbia to host Slavic Shield air defence drills in mid-October, says source", TASS, 27 September 2021.

8 The second entity is the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH).

9 J. Borger, "Arms shipment to Bosnian Serbs stokes EU fears", *The Guardian*, 13 February 2018.

10 R. Kraemer, "Serbia on the edge", *Report*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2022, pp.1-32.

11 I.F. Čančar, "Russia is weaponising Bosnia and Herzegovina's gas dependence", RUSI, 29 April 2021.

12 "Serbia on the Edge", p.20.

13 E.M. Lederer, "Russia and China try to end Bosnia's international overseer", AP News, 14 July 2021.

14 R. Kraemer, "Malign foreign influence in the Western Balkans: the EVC review 2020", *Balkans Watch Report*, 2020.

gration for BiH.¹⁵

Russia uses two components for destabilizing BiH. The first is ideological – Russia strives to project power in the region in a bid to protect its Slavic-Orthodox brotherhood. This is done through the ideology of “Greater Serbia” – today rebranded as *Srpski svet*, which advocates for the unification of all ethnic Serbs in the Western Balkans within one land. A parallel to “Greater Serbia” can be found in the ideological reasoning behind the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine – namely the restoration of *Russkiy Mir* (Greater Russia) within historical imperial borders.¹⁶ These ideologies, as reflected in the “Serbian question”, pursue ethnically homogenous territories through border violations to correct “historical mistakes”.¹⁷

Russia employs the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in conjunction with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to empower local actors across the region. In BiH specifically, the religious dynamics of ROC-SOC elements serve as a tool for manipulation of interreligious and interethnic narratives to achieve geopolitical goals, including the rebirth of the Slavic union.¹⁸

The “Serbian question” has been positioned as the most efficient platform for permanently embedding Russian interests in the Western Balkans, which leads to the second component of destabilizing activities in BiH, i.e. the strategic component. Under that line of action, Russia has supported different actors who have actively worked to undermine the political and territorial integrity of BiH – Milorad Dodik in RS, and Dragan Čović, head of the Croatian Democratic Union of BiH (HDZ BiH) in FBiH. Some of their initiatives include adopting an institutional framework of segregation through discriminatory election law reforms, establishing a series of parallel institutions to roll back state authority, and abolishing international mechanisms such as the Office of the High Representative (OHR).¹⁹ These initiatives undermine BiH’s stability, obstruct its Euro-Atlantic integration and impair BiH’s ability to participate in NATO’s security programmes. This is a strategy ultimately aimed at excluding BiH from European and transatlantic institutions.

On a geostrategic level, secession by RS would have

deeper consequences. It would *de facto* create a Transnistrian equivalent in the Balkans – an ideal lever for outsourcing crises in the region. It would offer Russia closer access to the “warm seas” of the Adriatic and would install an “independent” country on the borders of two NATO members, Croatia and Montenegro.

Therefore, utilising the ideological narrative of *Srpski svet* as part of a broader strategy to destabilize BiH risks pushing the region back into conflict. These ideas of ethnically pure territories ignore national boundaries. As such, they pose a threat to NATO members in the Western Balkans as well, as they target the inviolability and sovereignty of territorial borders guaranteed by the Washington Treaty. A crisis in BiH, with the support of Russia, could easily spill over into Montenegro, Kosovo or North Macedonia.

Increasing NATO's engagement

BiH was invited to join the MAP in 2010. Since then, progress towards full NATO membership has been slow, with the first Reform Programme – the document outlining cooperation with NATO – sent in December 2019. To rejuvenate this process, NATO can undertake certain steps, which could have an impact at various levels: political, strategic, institutional and military. The combination of these recommendations can aid BiH’s MAP implementation while fending off Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

With respect to the political level, bringing BiH into NATO would contribute to resolving the unfinished business of integrating the Western Balkans into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. On the strategic level, BiH’s accession to NATO would deprive Russia of a lever to destabilize the Western Balkans and NATO members via RS and other local actors in the region. It would also counter democratic backsliding while projecting stability in a potentially volatile corner of Europe. Delving into the institutional and military levels, there are further recommendations that NATO can consider in order to support the closer integration of BiH, in line with the Reform Programme for membership.

With regard to institutions, expanding the number of BiH civilian and military personnel participating in NATO’s various institutions and agencies could help consolidate Euro-Atlantic principles and values. BiH would find it easier to counter Russia’s influence operations and propaganda campaigns targeted against NATO and its role in the region. It would also assist in countering disin-

The “Serbian question” has been positioned as the most efficient platform for permanently embedding Russian interests in the Western Balkans

15 J. Mujanović, “Russia’s Bosnia gambit”, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 September 2017.

16 S. McIlagga, “History stokes Putin’s dream of a ‘Greater Russia’”, *New Lines Magazine*, 4 April 2022.

17 I.F. Čančar, “Russia’s new front with the West in Bosnia”, *RUSI*, 21 March 2022.

18 A. Dugin, “Serby – nashi samye vernye soyuzniki”, *Nashe Zavtra*, December 2019.

19 C. Schmidt, “61st report of the High Representative for implementation of the peace agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Secretary-General of the United Nations”, Office of the High Representative, Sarajevo, 20 April 2022.

formation attempts by local anti-Western and pro-Russian proxies that exploit political, societal and ethnic divisions in BiH.

Furthermore, NATO has a forward presence in BiH through the EUFOR Althea mission, drawing upon NATO's assets and capabilities for operations.²⁰ The Alliance could use this position to advance its engagement in BiH by providing NATO HQ Sarajevo with an increased budget and personnel for military and cyber security training. This would help NATO maintain a safe environment while engaging in initiatives that would increase the capacity of BiH's institutions to deter Russian hybrid attacks.

Regarding the military level, one of the conditions

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within BiH's MAP for further integration has been the registration of immovable defence properties. While BiH has managed to register more than half of the identified sites (31 out of 57), the rest have been used by RS, with the support of Russia, to block any further NATO integration of BiH. A possible way ahead for NATO could be to drop this condition

and work instead on modernizing a number of properties and locations that could be used by the Armed Forces of BiH (AFBiH) and NATO.

Also, the AFBiH have participated in a number of high-level military exercises such as Swift Response 2021 with the US Army. In 2023, the AFBiH are due to take part in the Defender Europe 2023 exercise between the US, NATO and partner nations. A NATO-certified, combat-ready Light Infantry Battalion

Group (INF-L-BNG) will participate.²¹ In order to maintain this scope of operation, training and equipment, NATO could consider establishing a mission along the lines of the UK's Operation Orbital, which could serve as a wider blueprint for training and supporting the AFBiH.²²

Finally, heightened military engagement would benefit NATO and BiH by closing the gap between the two sides' defence and security standards. This will also allow the AFBiH to ensure military interoperability with NATO's forces in joint exercises and peacekeeping missions. To that end, a bilateral framework led by the US and the UK through a NATO-BiH dialogue could offer additional funds and opportunities for strengthening military and related security capabilities, with a focus on anti-armour and anti-air systems – a lesson learned from the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Securing the Western Balkans on the Eastern flank

To help repel Russian influence, deeper NATO engagement with BiH would bolster the promotion and adoption of Atlantic values and serve as a platform for security – finally safeguarding the Euro-Atlantic Alliance and completing the unfinished business in the Western Balkans. Otherwise, left uncontrolled, the policies of *Srpski svet*, backed by Russia, will inevitably lead to conflict in the region.

As history has shown, the Western Balkans' stability is contingent upon BiH's stability. Therefore, political and military engagement, leading ultimately to NATO membership for BiH, will contribute to securing the Eastern flank of the Alliance. The war in Ukraine underscores the need to prevent the Western Balkans from becoming Moscow's next theatre of disruption in Europe.

20 O. Rittmann, "Operation Althea and the virtues of the Berlin Plus Agreement", *NDC Policy Brief* No.2, January 2021.

21 The AFBiH INF-L-BNG successfully conducted Self-Evaluation Level 2 in 2021, and is expected to undergo NATO Evaluation Level 2 by 2022.

22 N. Reynolds, "Security force assistance to Ukraine and the failure of deterrence", *RUSI Defence Systems*, Vol.24, RUSI, March 2022.



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