

Undermining Trust: Rearmament in the Western Balkans

In recent years, states in the Western Balkans have increasingly rearmed. The arms purchases – often accompanied by nationalist rhetoric – endanger the fragile trust in a region where conflicts remain unresolved. Serbia plays a key role in these dynamics. Belgrade also uses arms purchases to deepen its relations with Russia and China.

By Andrej Marković
and Jeronim Perović

Over two decades have passed since the end of the Yugoslav wars. Relations between the successor states – some of them former war enemies – have significantly improved. But unresolved conflicts continue to jeopardize stability in the Western Balkans. The relationship between Croatia and Serbia is fraught with tensions. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the political elites of the constituent peoples cannot agree on the constitutional order of their state. Belgrade still does not recognize the independence of its former province of Kosovo, proclaimed in 2008. In particular, the future of the Serb population in Kosovo remains unclear.

All these tensions are also the result of the prevalent style in which politics is conducted in the region. Given a lack of real success in fostering prosperity and the rule of law, political elites tend to play the nationalist card to retain power. People in the region are familiar with this strategy and the majority does not realistically expect a new war to occur. Western military presence also contributes to making conflicts less likely. The former Yugoslav space lies deep within the membership zone of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, and, since 2020, North Macedonia are NATO members. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are seeking membership while Serbia has signed a



Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic attends a Military Academy cadets graduation ceremony in Belgrade on September 14, 2019. Marko Djurica / Reuters

NATO partnership agreement. Furthermore, some 3,500 international peacekeeping forces under NATO leadership are deployed to Kosovo, and a small contingent of an EU-led military mission operates in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in both cases with Swiss participation.

At the same time, the region is witnessing increased rearmament, often accompanied by hostile rhetoric. Some states have boost-

ed their military spending. Croatia and Serbia in particular have procured major weapons. In a region still suffering from the aftermath of the 1990s wars, such developments undermine trust. This is hardly in the interest of Western states. The current situation also benefits Russia and China, both of which are seeking partners in the region. They provide arms and technology to Serbia, which has become their key security partner in the Western Balkans.

Reforms of the Armed Forces

The states of the region began reforming their armed forces after the Yugoslav Wars of Secession had ended. Large-scale armies pursuing national defense had become unaffordable. Instead, militaries were to participate in a system of collective security. Conscript armies were transformed into greatly downsized professional armed forces that were intended to be mobile and flexible. The agreement on sub-regional arms control negotiated in 1995 as part of the Dayton Agreement levelled out the unequal relations between the Yugoslav successor states in terms of combat equipment. These developments significantly restricted offensive capabilities. A number of factors contributed to building trust in the region: disarmament, ties to NATO, and, last but not least, the shared goal of European integration. Wars against neighboring countries seemed an increasingly unlikely prospect. Major modernization of the armed forces became hard to justify given the tight budget situation. Consequently, equipment became increasingly obsolete, and the professional armies turned into only moderately attractive employers still struggling to maintain their required strength.

Developing units able to partake in out-of-area missions was initially prioritized. This was especially true for countries that aimed to join NATO as quickly as possible. Participating in missions was a way for them to garner support in NATO as that organization became the region's main security partner. Those countries not (yet) in NATO also benefited from the transfer of knowledge and material, as well as from support for disarmament, training, and organizing regional cooperation.

The region has seen new dynamics in recent years. Economic growth allowed for more investment in the modernization of the armies. In addition, Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 prompted armed forces to once again take increasingly seriously the possibility of conventional war.

Croatia

This new dynamic started in Croatia. In 2015, it became known that Zagreb had approached the US with a request for M270 rocket launchers with a range of over 300 kilometers. This led to tensions between Croatia and Serbia, with each accusing the other of destabilizing the region. To date, Washington has not responded to Croatia's request. Since 2015, Croatia has been purchasing second-hand arms from Germany and the US at reduced prices, in-



cluding twelve Panzerhaubitze 2000 howitzers and 16 Kiowa Warrior attack helicopters. The purchase of Bradley Fighting Vehicles for an entire brigade alongside well over a thousand armor-piercing missiles is also pending.

National defense was thus in the spotlight again and has replaced the previous focus on equipping for foreign missions. Serbia in particular took note of the fact that the military hardware Croatia acquired is suitable for mechanized combat in the lowlands of the Croatian-Serbian border area. In fact, the 2017 Croatian National Security Strategy describes its neighbor in barely veiled terms as a threat to Croatia's security and reputation.

Nevertheless, the significance of recent arms imports should not be overestimated. The Croatian state budget continues to impose tight limits on the development of the armed forces. Procurement plans are revised time and again. Recently, for example, the planned acquisition of twelve new multi-role aircraft to replace the small MiG-21 fleet, which is only partially operational even for air police missions, was postponed again. The purchase is deemed too expensive in view of the Corona crisis and two earthquakes hitting Croatia in 2020.

Serbia

In the case of Serbia, too, arms imports have become conspicuous in recent years. While the country had procured virtually no arms from abroad since the collapse of Yugoslavia, it has significantly increased its military budget and spent more than one billion US dollars on modernizing its armed forces since 2016. Purchases have included military transport aircraft from the European manufacturer Airbus and from Russia (as well as four Mi-35 attack helicopters), a battery of Russian Pantsir air defense missile systems, French Mistral surface-to-air missiles, and six CH-92A unmanned combat aerial vehicles from China. The purchase of a Chinese FK-3 medium-range air defense system also appears to have been agreed. Ten second-hand MiG-29 fighter jets arrived from Russia and Belarus on beneficial terms and Moscow donated 30 T-72B1MS tanks and armored vehicles to Serbia. Russia is thus trying to maintain its role as Serbia's traditional arms supplier. Finally, Serbia is also relying on its domestic defense industry to produce armored vehicles, modern artillery, and guided weapons, among other things. The industry is encouraged to seek foreign partners. So far, the United Arab Emirates has funded the development of a guided missile, while cooperation on armed drones was agreed with China.

The diverse sources of supply are consistent with Serbia's foreign policy, which seeks EU membership while at the same time prioritizing relations with Russia and China. Serbia is an observer state with the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations is involved in a base in Nis, southern Serbia. Belgrade maintains a strategic partnership with China and has also deepened security relations in the recent past.

Serbia does not intend to join NATO. The Serbian parliament declared military neutrality in 2007 when Kosovo's independence – backed by Western countries – was looming. According to polls, a large majority in the country objects to joining NATO. This opinion is not only based on the memory of NATO bombings during the Kosovo War in 1999. In Serbia, which is surrounded by NATO members, the benefits of joining simply seem too insignificant to many people. At the same time, military missions such as the one in Afghanistan or against the so-called Islamic State are seen as costly undertakings that could make Serbia a target for terrorism. The prospect of possible tensions with

The main reasons behind these developments are likely to be found in Serbia's domestic politics.

Russia or China serves as further deterrent. Nevertheless, Serbia maintains far-reaching security relations with Western countries. It has a partnership agreement with NATO, provides troops for the EU's Balkan Battlegroup, and cooperates mainly with NATO member countries for training and peacekeeping missions.

The latest arms purchases cannot conceal the massive drain of cadre in the armed forces. Wage increases have repeatedly failed to be a panacea. As a result, air force personnel are aging, while the army is unable to reach its planned strength and cannot man all its tanks. Recently, the debate about reintroducing conscription, which has been going on for years, intensified. Possible future conscripts are being considered as complements to the professionals and for the build-up of reserve units. Moreover, arms purchases will continue in the near future: Serbia wants to acquire additional unmanned aerial vehicles and electronic warfare systems. The Russian Kra-

Armed Forces in the Western Balkans					
	Defense budget 2020 (in million USD)	Personnel	Tanks	Artillery/MLRS* (>122 mm)	Combat aircraft
SERBIA	1,036	28,500	212	208	30
CROATIA	970	15,200	75	67	12
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	174	9,200	45	124	0
NORTH MACEDONIA	165	6,100	31	73	0
MONTENEGRO	97	2,100	0	30	0
KOSOVO	75	2,500	0	0	0
* Multiple Launch Rocket Systems		Sources: IISS, <i>The Military Balance 2021</i> ; balkansec.net; own research.			

sukha system is being considered. Serbian officials explicitly referred to the war over Nagorno-Karabakh in the autumn of 2020, in which drones played an important role in Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia.

Conflict Potential

Even after twenty years of peace, occasions for conflict in the Western Balkans remain conceivable. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Serb-dominated entity *Republika Srpska* has armed its police force in recent years with support from Russia and Serbia.

Meanwhile, in the event of conflict, the operational capability of Bosnia-Herzegovina's multi-ethnic professional armed forces is questionable. The recent arms purchases in Serbia and in Croatia give the Bosniak political elites reasons for concern as Bosnia-Herzegovina's aspiration towards NATO membership is only progressing slowly due to opposition from *Republika Srpska*. Both Croatia and Serbia consider the protection of "their" co-nationals in Bosnia among their official national goals.

Relations between Kosovo and Serbia also remain fraught with tensions. The Serbian government considers Kosovo's efforts to build up its own armed forces as a major security threat. Belgrade has repeatedly reacted to activities of the Kosovo special police in the predominantly Serb-populated northern Kosovo with threatening military gestures.

Is Serbia gearing up for conflict? The main reasons behind these developments are likely to be found in domestic politics. Overall, armaments efforts are still too insignificant to upset the balance of power and thus fundamentally challenge the regional security order. The Serbian military continues to use equipment that is hope-

lessly outdated. However, even partial modernization is a success for the government as the armed forces are traditionally held in high esteem. Consequently, new procurements are spectacularly stage-managed by none other than President Aleksandar Vucic himself, who has presided over Serbia's development into a *de facto* one-party regime.

Media outlets that are loyal to the regime depict the president as tireless, single-handedly leading a formerly collapsed Serbia back to glory. The fact that defense policy has become less transparent in recent years is undoubtedly also due to considerations related to such propaganda. As no documents outlining the development of the armed forces are published, the country's leadership does not have to be judged against them. In general, the development of the armed forces is largely determined by cadres from the defense industry. Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that armament projects have been repeatedly oriented less to the actual needs than the promotion of the domestic arms industry. Because of its multi-million worth of exports and thousands of employees, this industry is an important economic and social factor – especially in peripheral parts of the country – that the state promotes. And it serves members of the elite for personal enrichment.

Serbia between West and East?

Belgrade has no interest in armed conflicts in the region. The government's resurrection narrative depends far more on the economy than on the military. Jobs are Vucic's best guarantee for upcoming electoral victories in a country marked by poverty, alongside his clientelist networks and authoritarian exercise of power. However, as the European market remains essential for Serbia, the country remains receptive to

Western pressure despite its advanced relations with Russia and China. The Russian base in Nis was denied special diplomatic status after criticism from the US and the EU. Belgrade also cancelled the participation of Serbian troops in military exercises in Belarus in the summer of 2020. In a country traumatized by the misery of sanctions in the 1990s, no government can afford an actual confrontation with Western powers.

This is all the more reason for the Serbian president to rely on symbolic politics. Vucic, who today presents himself as a reformer, began his political career in circles sympathetic to a Greater Serbia agenda, and these have remained part of his heterogeneous constituency to this day. For their sake, he has the Ministry of Defense pay tribute to convicted war criminals, while media outlets loyal to him exaggerate the importance of the partnerships with China and Russia. The latter are often seen as be-

this type of communication has real consequences as it generates confusion about Serbia's intentions and contributes to uncertainty in the region.

Challenges and Outlook

Even after the latest arms build-up in the region, the offensive capabilities of the armed forces in the Western Balkans remain limited and fall far short of the arms control ceilings still in force. Yet hostile rhetoric solidifies the view of the 'Other' as the enemy, creating the potential for ethno-national mobilization. Although the renewal of the armed forces is a legitimate concern, offensive capabilities could increase in the medium term to such an extent where they could be perceived as a real threat, undermining the hard-won trust that has been built up over the years.

At the very least, states in the region must stop rhetorically pitting weapons against each other. This raises the fundamental question of how politics in the Western Balkans can move away from nationalist provocations. This would require the support of the EU, which has an obvious interest in regional stability. Yet, the Union's leverage is constrained by the fact that the prospect of accession for the countries remaining outside the EU seems remote.

An alternative incentive to change could be the introduction of bridging measures pending full membership, perhaps based on broader access to the common market and the granting of subsidies. However, in the case of the latter, actors at local level should be directly involved as well in order to bypass existing clientelist hierarchies at least to some extent and gain new contacts. At the municipal level, everyday problems

are often more relevant than lofty national questions. Foreign partners should also refrain from delivering arms that might shift the balance in powers and could – in a worst-case scenario – lead to an arms race.

China and Russia will remain present in the Western Balkans. This need not be a detriment since the region can hardly do without energy imports from Russia and economic ties with China. However, Belgrade would be well advised to remember that security cooperation does not merely deliver success in terms of domestic politics. As competition among the great powers intensifies, Serbia's cultivation of ties to all sides threatens to lead to complications.

Finally, there is also the fundamental question of Serbia's future. Recent years have seen an increasing restriction of democratic party competition and the incremental erosion of the rule of law. If there is no change of course in this respect, any power shift in Serbia threatens to be disorderly. This in turn would further endanger the already fragile stability in the Western Balkans.

For more on perspectives on on Euro-Atlantic Security, see [CSS core theme page](#).

Andrej Marković is a research assistant at the Department of Eastern European History at the University of Zurich and Member of the Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES).

Jeronim Perović is a Professor at the University of Zurich and Head of the CEES.

This analysis was developed within the framework of a strategic cooperation between the CSS and the CEES.

At the very least, states in the region must stop rhetorically pitting weapons against each other.

ing aimed at the West, as a way of gaining extra leverage. However, claiming close relations with Beijing and Moscow allows the regime to satisfy the appetite for revanchism in domestic politics – at least symbolically.

The threats against Kosovo are also part of Vucic's grandstanding. The tabloid media regularly write about a looming war in the region, allowing the president to present himself as the guardian of the country and, simultaneously, the keeper of peace and the patron of the armed forces. Nevertheless,