

The Western Balkans and the Revenge of History

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Introduction

The Warsaw Summit affirmed Alliance interest in and commitment to many geographic regions and nations, without stating priorities. The Western Balkans drew attention, with Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro receiving specific mention in the Summit Communiqué.² However, the Summit promoted a continuance of current NATO activity in this region, not a shift or amelioration. Implicit in this is that the status quo, a small NATO force in Kosovo to enhance security and several liaison offices to monitor partnership activity and the application of the Membership Action Plan in the other Western Balkans states, is sufficient. This paper will argue that such efforts are too small and disjointed to meet the growing challenges in the region, especially given NATO's obligation to conflict prevention in the wake of its significant and successful interventions there in 1996 and 1999.

The Warsaw Summit also involved discussion on a re-invigorated line

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² Warsaw Summit Communiqué, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016, paragraph 107; http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm, accessed 28 July 2017.



of effort around ‘projecting stability.’ Paragraphs 80-85 of the Communiqué explain the importance of stability projection, but with clear implication that this really only involves enhanced partnership activity, Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB), and gauging reform needed for membership accession. Absent from the Communiqué is commitment to power projection to shore up regional security and enforce stability if required. Given the effectiveness of large-scale NATO interventions in the Balkans twenty years ago, it is strange that projecting stability does not explicitly include potential deployment of a full range of military capabilities to adequately allow the Alliance to meet the broadest range of challenges. This paper will argue that as NATO begins to seriously debate missions for ‘projecting stability’ outside of Article 5 boundaries, with special focus on the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region,³ it might be wise to first consider doing so where proximity demands immediacy of action with sizeable projection: the Western Balkans.

The first section of this paper describes previous NATO interventions in the Western Balkans before granting a general assessment of recent challenges posed by “outside actors” such as Russia, China and the Gulf States. The third section reviews current NATO missions in the Western Balkans while the final section explains why projected stability there, including the possible deployment of Very-High-Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and follow-on forces as an effective de-escalatory and confidence-building mechanism, should be specific strategic option for NATO, and a part of NATO operational planning.

The Revenge of History

In 1940 Rebecca West in the *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* claimed to have travelled to Yugoslavia “to see what history meant in flesh and blood.”⁴ By this she suggested that Yugoslavia was perpetually locked in cycles of ethnic and religious violence.

Fifty years on Francis Fukuyama declared an end to such cycles. His 1989 essay and 1992 book by the same name, declared “the end of history.”⁵ The demise of communism, he suggested, left no obstacles to “mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of the Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” There would no longer be “ideological grounds for major conflict between nations.” Islamic fundamentalism would have no “universal significance.” Nationalism would have no “political program beyond the negative desire of independence *from* some other group.” Such nationalism could not be expansionist, and did “not seem capable of creating new empires....” To Fukuyama, mankind’s ‘ideological evolution’ had put an end to all imperialism and made trivial any other ideology in competition with liberalism. Fukuyama’s worldview has become mainstay for all European Union (EU) activity in the Balkans, and guides both EU and NATO work there as they try to integrate states into the Union and the Alliance once they have demonstrated commitment to liberal democratic foundations.

Unfortunately however, when tracing the footsteps of Rebecca West in the Western Balkans, one

³ Margherita Bianchi, Guillaume Lasconjarias, and Alessandro Marrone, “Projecting Stability in NATO’s Southern Neighbourhood,” Conference Report 03/17, Research Division, NATO Defense College, No. 3/17, July 2017.

⁴ Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, Edinburgh; Canongate, 1995, p. 103.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, 16 (Summer, 1989), pp. 1-18: Quotations from pages 1 and 13-14.



sees less evidence of the triumph of Fukuyama's 'ideological evolution' - states transforming into western liberal democracies - than states locked in flesh and blood of history. Resurgent nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and the vanguard activity of a new form of imperialism, coupled with incessant corruption, obstruct progress. These catalysts for instability and renewed conflict are a direct result of NATO and EU drift of attention away from this region since 2004 and 2008 respectively. Russia, China, Gulf States and various illicit influencers have filled the vacuum in the wake of NATO and EU withdrawals. The West seems ready to repeat past mistakes in this strategically important region.

European and American commitments in the Balkans during the war years 1991-1995 were inconsistent and ineffectual, the result of poor policy decisions. The situation in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH) was allowed to deteriorate as Western nations adhered to their own state interests, preferring bilateral activities in each country at the expense of formulating a common international strategy for bringing regional stability. The US deemed any commitment to the Balkans as discretionary and absent association to any vital interests.⁶ Western Europeans felt that while they had clear interests in the Balkans they could not justify the costs associated with the efforts and risks of enforcing stability.⁷ This sentiment was exacerbated by enduring association

of various western European nations to regional states (for instance the traditional German support of the Croats and the French support of the Serbs). Pessimism produced incremental and conservative investments, largely through United Nations (UN) organizations such as the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), with subsequent want of success.⁸ The activities of various national and international groups were uncoordinated and given to short term expediency, securing temporary local truces that succeeded only in giving Presidents Milosevic and Tudjman the freedom to exercise economy in those areas and to move and concentrate forces for offensives elsewhere.⁹ Until a combination of public opinion and political pressure in the wake of Srebrenica and Gorazde forced a reversal of policy in 1995, no effective strategy for stabilization existed, and UNPROFOR lacked the means and the will to achieve it.

The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (GFAP – or Dayton Accord, signed 14 December 1995) created the first united and longer-term guide for unified action in the Balkans. The GFAP facilitated the approval of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1031 authorizing NATO to assume responsibility for military operations in BiH from UNPROFOR. NATO, desiring to acquire a sustainable *raison d'être* after the end of the Cold War, welcomed this mission. Under UNSCR 1031 and SACEUR OPLAN 40105

⁶ Jurek Martin and Laura Silber, "US Warns Serbia against military action in Kosovo" *Financial Times*, 29 December 1992.

⁷ Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness," *Policy Review*, No.113.

⁸ The United Nations Protection Force existed as the UN's singular peacekeeping force in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia between February 1992 and March 1995. At its height it was composed of 39,000 soldiers from Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States.

⁹ Carole Rogel, *The Breakup of Yugoslavia and Its Aftermath, Revised Edition*, London: Greenwood Press, 2004, p. 125.



(Operation DECISIVE ENDEAVOR) the Alliance effectively began to project power in December 1995 by moving 60,000 troops rapidly into BiH, separated rival Federation and Serb 'Entities' along an Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL), forced the cantonment of Entity weapons and units under NATO supervision, and achieved stability. The arrival of this Implementation Force (IFOR) and the sustainment of forces under the NATO Stabilization Force (SFOR – to whom IFOR transferred authority in December 1996) brought breathing room to the conflicted region and allowed international partners (the UN, OSCE and EU) to attempt to create the social and politic mechanisms for enduring stability. This was substantially threatened in 1999 with the Kosovo crisis, which saw the second NATO projection of power into the Western Balkans. Once the danger of general war subsided in 2000, largely because of presence of 50,000 NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) soldiers in relatively confined geographic space, optimism followed. The face of NATO's stability projection changed from large occupying forces to Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities. Most Balkans states accepted NATO partnership and submitted to the journey toward eventually NATO and EU membership. Russia and other powerful international players chose not to spoil these efforts whilst large NATO forces remained in the Western Balkans.

However, even when NATO forces were guaranting an armed peace, policy mistakes continued. European and American leaders frequently faced a dilemma of

choosing between the need for stability and want of progress toward democracy and the rule of law. From the beginning they accepted that the best way of achieving both goals was to continue support for elite local and national power brokers who claimed to be the only ones who could ensure stability and promote change in a manner that avoided violence. Connected with sophisticated political-criminal networks – some linked directly to Croatia, Serbia or other international states - and representative of the interests of specific ethnic groups (Bosnian Croat, Bosniak, Albanian Kosovar, or Bosnian or Kosovar Serb), these elites have remained in political and socio-economic control.¹⁰ They have consolidated power in the wake of the reduction in NATO troop levels before SFOR was replaced by the 2500 strong European Union Force (EUFOR) Althea in 2004, and KFOR was reduced to 17,000 in 2003 and then down to 4500. The subsequent reduction of missions and mission size for the UN, OSCE, and EU since 2008 signaled a Western disengagement during which the elites drew support and maintained power by claiming to be the only reliable agents of stability. Continued Western support has reinforced old power-sharing arrangements that remain at the heart of most socio-economic problems in the region. These arrangements perpetuate the political patronage system that impedes progress toward liberal democracy.¹¹ While declaring a commitment to progress, the elites actually do little to move the democratic yardsticks, suggesting that rapid progression can destabilize.¹² For this reason they

¹⁰ Francisca de Borja Lasheras, "EU enlargement and the Western Balkans: Old habits die hard" European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 December 2013; http://www.ecfr.eu/blog/entry/eu_enlargement_and_the_western_balkans_old_habits_die_hard accessed 8 August 2017.

¹¹ Francisca de Borja Lasheras, with Vessela Tcherneva and Fredrik Wesslau, "Return to instability: How migration and great power politics threaten the Western Balkans," European Council on Foreign Relations, 21st March, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return_to_instability_6045 accessed 22 August 2017.

¹² "Balkan Troubles: The six countries of the Western Balkans need the EU's full attention," *Berlin Policy Journal* – Blog: <http://berlinpolicyjournal.com/balkan-troubles/> accessed 8 March 2017.



have been labelled “stabilitocrats”¹³ and their regimes “stabilitocracies.”¹⁴ states which actively promote the need of stability over liberal democratic practice.

Many Europeans and Americans appear to have accepted the existence of Western Balkan ‘stabilitocracies’ as the best of many poor options. Idealists continue to believe that these elites will, over time, transform themselves into liberals and address the significant socio-economic problems in the region.¹⁵ Pragmatists prefer elite-run ‘stabilitocracies’ committed to the status quo to any ‘backslide’ into renewed armed conflict.¹⁶ Both sentiments effectively substitute regional stability for promotion of democracy. Both attribute far too much threat to ethnic tension, and ignore the growing influence of outside actors who overtly promote nationalism, reinvent nostalgic narratives of imperial pasts, or sow the seeds of an religious extremism heretofore unseen in the Western Balkans.

The NATO Alliance can collectively take neither an overt idealist nor pragmatist stance regarding the issue of stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans. But it is now more than ever essential that NATO member states individually commence pressure upon upon these corrupt elites for the simple fact that international players dedicated to weakening Europe and NATO are now forming strong relationships

with them, creating circumstances wherein a continuance of the status quo will likely destabilize the region and threaten violence and armed conflict; a potential that NATO cannot ignore as it might unravel the gains made since 1996.

The Western Balkans, an “inner courtyard” in Europe, surrounded by NATO members, may well become a grand theatre of renewed chaos, incinerating Fukuyama’s bold predictions.¹⁷ Russia has grown increasingly more assertive and determined to fuel a form of nationalism that is expansionist in its desire to create “greater Serbia,” if not nostalgically imperialist in Russia’s vision of uniting Slavic and Orthodox peoples into a union of interests. China, also driven by ancient imperial nostalgia, invests massively and indiscriminately in regional infrastructure (through elite patronage) to gain leverage over economies without concern for Western European integration and democratization. The Gulf States and indigenous associates, not shy to support old nostalgic imperial linkages through religious connectivity, have invested heavily in Muslim community renewal and the transplantation of Wahhabism and Salafism to a region where perceptions of Islamification threatens integrity of states and tensions between Entities, reinforcing nationalist sentiments and spawning centres of

¹³ Dimitar Bechev, Director European Policy Institute, “After the EU global strategy – Building Resilience,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, Section 14, 70, https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/After_EU_Global_Strategy_Resilience.pdf; accessed 8 August 2017; see also Carnegie Europe, Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe, 3 May 2017.

¹⁴ Dr Florian Bieber, Professor and Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, Austria and Coordinator of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), “The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans – Authoritarianism and EU Stabilitocracy,” *Europe Western Balkans Archives* 28 March 2017, at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/28/biepag-in-ep-the-crisis-of-democracy-in-the-western-balkans-authoritarianism-and-eu-stabilitocracy/> accessed on 8 August 2017.

¹⁵ Here we see the enduring influence of Fukuyamian thinking. Liberal bureaucrats remain convinced that politicians in these states will inevitably embrace western liberal democratic value structures – much as Fukuyama’s wagon drivers who are “temporarily heading in the wrong direction” will correct their course once they understand the merit of such structures. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, Perennial – Harper Collins, 2002, pp. 338.

¹⁶ For explanation of Backsliding see: Marko Stojić, “EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Out of sight, out of mind?” *Policy Paper*, European Institute for European Policy, February 2016.

¹⁷ “Balkan Troubles: The six countries of the Western Balkans need the EU’s full attention,” *Berlin Policy Journal* – Blog: <http://berlinpolicyjournal.com/balkan-troubles/> accessed 8 March 2017.



extremism at the same time.¹⁸ These Centrifugal forces are not just obstacles to integration of Western Balkans into Europe, but threaten to create within the region bases of operations for Russian, Chinese, and Islamist activities. This will make Fukuyama's ideal impossible, and recreate in the Western Balkans traditional geopolitical frontiers in territory surrounded by NATO members. NATO's role in countering this backslide into history must be in preparing for projecting stability using full spectrum of capabilities throughout the Western Balkans.

The Challenges from External Influencers

Kosovo

The last sizeable NATO contingent in the Western Balkans girds the politically-fragile peace in Kosovo; a peace suffering increasingly from significant Russian and Gulf States' influences.

Russia was a founding member of KFOR but withdrew in 2003. Suspicious of EU and UN intentions, the Kremlin subsequently took direct control of the Kosovo portfolio from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To exert direct and effective political influence, Moscow established a liaison office in Pristina subordinate to its embassy in Belgrade with a mandate to protect the Kosovo Serb community. Moscow's senior diplomat to the United Nations

Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for the Future Status Process for Kosovo (UNOSEK) played a key role in drafting the 2007 UN "Comprehensive Proposal" containing sections dedicated to the protection of Kosovo Serbs and the Serbian Orthodox Church.¹⁹ President Putin still portrays himself as a guarantor of these cultural allies, but has toned down previous statements suggesting that Kosovo Serbs might use an independence referendum to secure their political future.²⁰

Russia will remain politically opportunistic and pragmatic regarding Kosovo, but will continue exerting soft-power influence through its media, sponsored cultural centres, Orthodox churches, and through business investment. Russian media support to the Kosovo Serbs through *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* has grown, and disseminates anti-Albanian sentiment while promoting a vision of a Pan-Slavic sphere of social and political solidarity and Christian Orthodox protectionism. The Mitrovica-bound train incident of January 2017²¹ added fuel to Russian influence efforts, as did the draft law sent to the legislature by President Hashim Thaci in March calling for the transformation of Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a bona fide army.²² Russia's other interests include attempts to gain construction rights for a Gazprom East-West pipeline through Kosovo to Albania. Initially unsuccessful, Russia is careful not to jeopardize renewal of this initiative unnecessarily.

¹⁸ Predag Petrović, "Islamic radicalism in the Balkans," European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 2016.

¹⁹ UNOSEK, *Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement*, 2 February 2007, <http://www.kuvendikosoves.org/common/docs/Comprehensive%20Proposal%20.pdf> accessed 01 September 2017.

²⁰ Ebi Spahiu "Russia Expands Its Subversive Involvement in Western Balkans" *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (The Jamestown Foundation), 23 January 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-expands-subversive-involvement-western-balkans> accessed 22 August 2017.

²¹ A train decorated with Serbian nationalist and Christian Orthodox images and slogans departed Belgrade on 14 January 2017 destined for Mitrovica, a city with Serb ethnic majority in northern Kosovo. It was halted short of the Kosovo border amid Serb claims that Kosovar ethnic Albanians had threatened to mine the railway if the train continued: see The Associated Press, "Serbian Nationalist Train Halts at Border With Kosovo," *The New York Times*, 14 January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/14/world/europe/kosovo-serbia-train.html> accessed 22 August 2017.

²² Stratfor, "Russia Stirs the Hornets's Nest" <https://worldview.stratfor.com/analysis/russia-stirs-hornets-nest> access 14 August 2017.



Other real influence peddlers in Kosovo are the Gulf States. Traditional association with Turkey is quite natural for a former Ottoman province, but this reinvigorated association is overshadowed by the overt presence of Gulf State economic, social and religious agencies. The number of mosques in Kosovo exceeds by several hundred the numbers previously existing there, most sponsored directly by Saudi Arabia.²³ This has allowed for the introduction of Wahhabi and Salafist teachings and practices which were foreign to the region not long ago. Saudi Arabia continues to sponsor the education of young Kosovo Albanians in Saudi religious colleges and their subsequent employment in Kosovo. The sharp increase of Kosovo Albanians flocking to join ISIS in 2014-2015 revealed to the intelligence community the significant increase in Radicalism in Kosovo, a trend that has not yet been reversed.²⁴ This serves to justify Serb and Russian claims to protect Kosovo Serbs from the threat of Islamification and the emergence of extremist terrorist bases of operation.

Montenegro, Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)²⁵, and Albania

Member states Montenegro and Albania are not im-

mune from Russian and Chinese influence; nor is FYRoM. Russian propagandist activities to promote pro-Serbian and pro-Slav sentiment while spreading fear about ethnic Albanian attempts to create “greater Albania,” pose the greatest influential threats.²⁶ There was real concern as well over Montenegro’s entry into NATO, and the alleged coup attempt by Russian proxies in 2016 and subsequent activities in 2017 may well have been an effort to undermine the process. Moscow’s political interference also extends to the FYRoM where Russian propagandist activities exacerbate an already tense situation. Russia economic engagement includes a variety of activities in investment and tourism, with a concentration of Russian (and Ukrainian and Belarusian) capital in real estate and related developments, not limited to the Adriatic coast.

China is another influencer in these countries, making significant economic inroads. Montenegro and Albania are allowing the Chinese company Pacific to build the “Blue Corridor” highway to connect the countries, while FYRoM solicits Chinese investment in energy, agriculture and tourism sectors while building highways to be part of its intercontinental One Belt One Road initiative.²⁷ While not a direct destabilizer, Chinese activity reinforces the power of local elites and indirectly encourages the continua-

²³ Carlotta Gall, “How Kosovo Was Turned into Fertile Ground for ISIS: Extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudis and others have transformed a once-tolerant Muslim society into a font of extremism,” *New York Times*, 21 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html> accessed 12 August 2017: For a nuanced critique see; Frud Bezhan, “A Growing Split Between Islamic, Secular Identities In Kosovo,” *Radio Free Europe/radio Liberty*, 7 August 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-split-islamic-identity-secular-traditions/27906304.html> accessed 28 August 2017.

²⁴ Adrian Shtuni, “Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo,” United States Institute of Peace, 19 December 2016, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/12/dynamics-radicalization-and-violent-extremism-kosovo> accessed 01 September 2017.

²⁵ Turkey recognizes the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.

²⁶ de Borja Lasheras, Tcherneva and Wesslau, “Return to instability,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 21st March, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return_to_instability_6045 accessed 22 August 2017.

²⁷ BIRN Team, “Balkans States Woo Chinese Investors at Summit,” *Balkan Insight*, 26 November 2015, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/china-seeks-closer-ties-with-balkans-11-25-2015> accessed 22 August 2017.



tion of the patronage system and corruption.²⁸ Chinese money arriving without strings attached has proven to be an attractive alternative to EU promises thoroughly tied to conditionality reforms. Chinese efforts work against the processes of integration of these states into the EU and NATO.

Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH)

As in small Western Balkans states, Chinese economic “imperial” ambitions have led to infrastructure development in BiH, taking advantage of the willingness of established elites to accept Chinese project funds without conditionality, and reducing EU and NATO leverage for insisting upon reform. In this regard China acts a spoiler to EU and NATO efforts to move BiH toward integration.

The greatest influencers in BiH, however, are those with Muslim association. Turkey is very interested, understandably, in post-conflict reconstruction of mosques and Ottoman heritage sites. However, it is the Gulf States, non-traditional actors in the region, who lead in injecting significant sums in construction, including of mosques, while Iran is sponsoring the establishment of libraries.

The combined activity of Muslim associates is having obvious social effects in Sarajevo and other towns, where people being paid to learn Arabic and to wear non-traditional (Arabic) clothing.²⁹ The consequence is, again understandably, a hardening of position in Republika Srpska (RS), and acceptance of Russian and Serbian soft power support as a counter to a perception of Islamification of the state. Reports of increases in the number and location of radical extremist terrorist cells in BiH fuel Serb rhetoric of fears.³⁰

The most serious threat to Western Balkans’ stability is perhaps a potential declaration of independence from BiH by Republika Srpska. The Head of the the Republika Srpska entity, Milorad Dodik, drew attention to this when he organized a referendum for 25 September 2016 to reinstate “Statehood Day” in the Entity, which was seen as a precursor to an independence referendum in 2018. Meetings between Dodik and Putin in Moscow on 18 September implied clear support of Moscow.³¹ Dodik also called for the end of the EU military mission in Bosnia.³² The High Representative for BiH, Valentin Inzko, declared that such a move

²⁸ Michal Makocki and Zora Nechev, “Balkan Corruption: The China Connection,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, 18 July 2017, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/balkan-corruption-china-connection> accessed 28 August 2017; see also, Gul M. Kurtoglu Eskisar and Aysegul Komsuoglu, “A Critical assessment of the transformative power of EU Reforms on reducing corruption in the Balkans,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 15:3, pp. 301-326, 24 March 2015.

²⁹ de Borja Lasheras, Tcherneva and Wesslau, “Return to instability,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 21st March, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return_to_instability_6045 accessed 22 August 2017; also, Carlotta Gall, “How Kosovo Was Turned into Fertile Ground for ISIS: Extremist clerics and secretive associations funded by Saudis and others have transformed a once-tolerant Muslim society into a font of extremism,” *New York Times*, 21 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html> accessed 12 August 2017.

³⁰ Tej Parikh, “How Islamic State Is Putting the Balkans on Edge,” *The National Interest*, 30 October 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-islamic-state-putting-the-balkans-edge-18229> accessed 14 August 2017; see also; Robert E. Hamilton, “keep Your Eye on the Balkans,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 9 March 2017, <http://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/keep-eye-balkans/> accessed 14 August 2017.

³¹ Stephen Blank, “Russian Meddling in the Balkans Threatens to Reverse Region’s European Integration,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 13, Issue 166, 17 October 2016; see also; “A Referendum by Serbs Threatens Yet More Trouble for Bosnia,” *The Economist*, 27 September 2016, online resource at: <http://www.economist.com/new/europe/21707877-banned-vote-separte-bosnian-serb-national-day-has-some-people-talking-war-referendum>, accessed 7 July 2017; and also: Stratfor, “A Referendum to Reheat Bosnia’s Frozen Conflict,” 22 September 2016, at; <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/referendum-reheat-bosnias-frozen-conflict> accessed 03 September 2017.

³² de Borja Lasheras, Tcherneva and Wesslau, “Return to instability,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 21st March, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return_to_instability_6045 accessed 22 August 2017.



would lead to “international intervention.”³³ Americans and Europeans have condemned this threat from Dodik, but realists cannot help but wonder if Western (one would presume NATO) military intervention is worth it, or if in fact the division of BiH is not an expedient way to enhance overall stability in the region? However, to answer in the affirmative is to acknowledge that such a division would serve Russian interests of solidifying Slavic-Russian association, providing Russia with a stronger regional base, and sacrifice the liberal democratic frame of thinking that makes the EU (and NATO membership) attractive to the peoples of the Balkans.

All these internal and external influencers combined produce the potential for renewed sectarian violence in BiH more than the possibility of Inter-State war in the Western Balkans. But it is possible that if Republika Srpska secedes, sectarian violence will spread beyond BiH.

Serbia

The greatest external influencers in Serbia are naturally Russia but more increasingly China. Using its deep cultural linkage to Serbia, Russia has significantly increased its propagandist activity reaching the majority of Serbs through *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*. This population holds NATO as an enemy in their memory.³⁴

These efforts, combined with Russian banking enterprises and the existence of Russian paramilitary organizations in Serbia (The Balkans Cossack Army,

which reports to Moscow’s Central Cossack Army paramilitary),³⁵ have considerable potential to exert spoiler influence upon Serbian desires to integrate with Europe. Moscow has commenced re-equipping Serb military forces and conducting joint exercises. Russia remains intent on persuading Belgrade against joining NATO, though Moscow has considerably less influence on the issue of EU integration. Indeed, Russia’s energy pipeline building activity through Serbia stands to gain from some EU linkage. This allows Belgrade to actively seek multilateral associations to allow political balance and the best opportunities for industrial renewal. Serbia is therefore increasingly engaging with China in industrial and infrastructure projects at home.³⁶ Belgrade also exerts its own agenda with less sympathy for Republika Srpska separatism as the Serbian Government and business community sees the EU as the best road to prosperity.

However, sectarian violence in BiH or Kosovo could quickly push the Serbian government to cease its EU-orientation. The fear of Islamification of the Balkans, of unregulated mass migration into or through the region, and extremist activities that threaten Serb minorities, could jeopardize Western efforts to integrate Serbia into Europe.

The slow boil of unrest in the Western Balkans has much less to do with ethnicity than with influence of outside actors reinforcing notions of nationalism, reinventing idealistic narratives of imperial pasts, or sowing the seeds of an extremist form of Islam

³³ S. Mišljenović, “Incko preti umesto da miri,” *Novosti* Online, 15 December 2016 at; http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/republika_srpska/aktuelno.655.html:639964-Incko-preti-umesto-da-miri accessed 28 July 2017

³⁴ Gordana Knezevic, “Sputnik, Selective Memory, And NATO’s 1999 Bombing Of Serbia,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 18 April 2017, 13:06 GMT, <http://www.rferl.org/a/sputnik-selective-memory-nato-bombing-serbia/28437149.html> accessed 14 August 2017.

³⁵ See official website at: <http://vko-ckv.ru>) accessed 03 September 2017.

³⁶ Jovan Teokarevic, “Serbia: Perspectives on Eurasian integration,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 8 June 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian_integration-serbia accessed 4 September 2017.



foreign to this region. All of these actors take advantage of actual socio-economic conditions to exacerbate problems; youth unemployment varies between 20 and 40 percent; state economies have stagnated; the potential for ‘colour revolution’ protests; growing environmental problems; and the threats posed by unregulated mass migration and economic emigration to Central or Northern Europe. These realities are both obfuscated, and leveraged when convenient, by constant assertions made by local elites and external spoiler actors that regional problems are all directly related to ethnic tensions. European policy-makers are too willing to believe this. Consumed with issues of domestic and EU security, crises in the Middle East, threats to the Baltic States, war in Ukraine, and populist forces in both the United States and Europe, it is too easy for these Trans-Atlantic communities to accept a deterministic view of the Balkans as a region of eternal ethnic divisions (indeed ‘balkanization’) defying resolution, where history will prevail. The situation in late 2017 is worsening by such pessimism as more assessments categorize the Western Balkans as backsliding.³⁷

As geo-politics re-emerges in the Balkans, re-alighting sentiments dormant for some time, the EU finds itself ill equipped to handle events. The EU simply does not do geo-politics well.³⁸ It is from this reality that NATO’s importance shines: geopolitics being the arena wherein the Alliance’s interests, values and functions show greatest potency.³⁹

NATO in the Western Balkans

NATO continues three essential activities in the Western Balkans to prevent renewed inter-ethnic violence and to enhance regional security: operations, partnership programs, and membership processes. Extant operations include a presence in Kosovo, and liaison missions in BiH, Serbia, and FYRoM. These provide a forward presence to monitor multifarious activities under the rubric of Partnership using Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAP) with each nation. As well, through these missions, the Alliance continues to encourage each nation to make progress toward ascension to NATO membership.

KFOR is the largest NATO presence in the Western Balkans and is the Alliance’s longest standing military mission, comprising four and a half thousand soldiers (reduced from an initial strength of 55,000 in 1999) from 31 different NATO and Partner nations.⁴⁰ The command still retains both non-kinetic and kinetic capability. It has a number of important tasks: providing support to the Kosovo Security Organization (KSO – composed of Kosovo Police – KP – and the Kosovo Security Force – KSF); capacity building and development; providing support to the efforts of the OSCE, the EU, the UN and other international partners; monitoring the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL), and conducting joint ABL patrols with the Kosovo Border Police and synchronized patrols with the Serb Armed Forces; protecting the Visoki Monastery;

³⁷ For explanation of Backsliding see: Marko Stojić, “EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Out of sight, out of mind?” Policy Paper, European Institute for European Policy, February 2016.

³⁸ de Borja Lasheras, Tcherneva and Wesslau, “Return to instability,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 21st March, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return_to_instability_6045 accessed 22 August 2017.

⁴⁰ Alexander Moens, *How NATO’s Values and Functions Influence its Policy and Action*, Fellowship Monograph 7, Research Division, NATO Defense College, Rome, May 2016, pp. 1-14.



providing armed units if required as third security responder (after KP and the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo - EULEX); and being the Tactical Reserve for the EUFOR in BiH.

KFOR provides an impartial security guarantor for two perceived threats; the external (Serbian/Russian) threats to Kosovo Albanians, and the internal (Kosovo Albanian) threats to Kosovo Serbs. KFOR constantly faces the challenge of striking the right balance between helping the KSF transform adequately while gaining acceptance of KSF amongst the Kosovo Serbs, between progressing toward political independence of Kosovo while keeping its territorial integrity intact and normalizing relations between Pristina and Belgrade without destabilizing the region in this process. While NATO does not maintain a permanent presence in Serbia, good Partner nation relations and joint training and education activities give the Alliance limited access and influence in that country which may assist KFOR in a crisis.⁴¹

The Alliance also maintains the NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT) in Pristina, providing military and ministerial advice and liaison to the KSF and Kosovo Ministry of Defence. The Team coordinates NATO capacity building, education, training and support to these organizations, covering seven priority initiatives and 16 discrete focus areas that together would create sustainable Kosovo security institutions.⁴² Some important successes in the development of KSF capacity - EOD operations for

example - have been achieved. In December 2016, the NAC gave extra focus and guidance to the NALT, directing an increase in NALT-KSF cooperative efforts on joint exercises, training, education and support.⁴³ NATO's KFOR mission and the NALT together provide the Alliance a forward presence to somewhat counter Russian and Gulf State soft power influences, and the rise of Radicalism. However, KFOR's size and mandate limitations constrain its effectiveness.

NATO maintains a presence in FYRoM, not far geographically from the NALT and KFOR. Originally established as NATO Rear Headquarters for KFOR in 1999, the presence transformed into the current NATO Liaison Office Skopje in 2012. The task of the Liaison Office is to provide timely and sound advice to FYRoM government authorities on defence aspects of SSR and NATO membership processes.⁴⁴ The Office also stands ready to provide support to other NATO missions as required, and to provide permanent representation of NATO in FYRoM. Currently, political crisis originating well before the elections of 11 December 2016 and the related re-emergence of ethnic and other special tensions completely frustrate Alliance efforts for progress on SSR toward eventual membership consideration.

NATO's operational missions in the Western Balkans reinforce reforms needed to move countries into and through the steps of the Membership Action Plan (MAP). These require demonstrated progress in the

⁴¹ See: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50100.htm# accessed 15 August 2017.

⁴² See: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_144933.htm accessed 9 August 2017.

⁴³ Announced at JFC-N Balkans Study Day, Naples, 23 February 2017.

⁴⁴ See: <https://www.jfcnaples.nato.int/hqskopje> accessed 9 August 2017.



areas of politics and economics, defence and military reform, resource control and management, national security, and legal systems reform. The process of moving through the MAP takes years. Montenegro commenced MAP processes in 2010, and in December 2015 was invited to start final negotiations for ascension, achieving it in June 2017. During these years Montenegro re-structured its armed forces, activated new law enforcement initiatives, demonstrated resolve to fight organized crime, and participated substantially in the ISAF mission. Montenegro is a case study for other nations in the Western Balkans to follow. As Montenegro advanced through the MAP process, FYRoM signalled aspirations toward membership, as did elements in the government and military in BiH.

Unfortunately in BiH significant obstacles to MAP progress remain in the form of spoiler activity. Of all of the NATO missions in the Western Balkans, the NATO Military Liaison and Advisory Mission (NATO Headquarters) Sarajevo faces the largest challenges.⁴⁵ While NATO HQ Sarajevo has made some progress in SSR and defence institution building - such as the initiation of several Defense Reviews, and continued commitment to the MAP - actual progress toward defence reform has stagnated.⁴⁶ There is continued frustration over how BiH ministerial authorities play the international community against each other, exacerbated by the fact the NATO HQ Sarajevo cannot independently fund reform initiatives but must rely heavily upon member

state sponsorship, necessitating bilateral cooperation with member state embassies in Sarajevo. Just as in the early 1990s, many of these member states have reverted back to following their own agendas in BiH. External actors, namely China, Russia, and the Gulf States are pursuing their own national interests and agendas, supported by powerful reserves of money and influence. The Chinese are sponsoring large infrastructure renewal and support power elites; the Gulf States provide significant proselytizing and financial assistance to the Bosniacs and to spread their religious interests, and the Russians provide a sense of cultural unity to the Bosnian Serbs which provides them leverage over events. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to SSR and DCB reform is the requirement to conduct three sets of work effort on every initiative, one with each of the ethnic groups. After eleven years with a unified army, multi-ethnic in name, the reality remains that the General Officers and their units line up uniformly with the ethnic/political divides in the country. These reflect three distinct political agendas, with the Bosniacs favouring a centralized state, and the Bosnian Croats and Serbs desiring decentralized political and civil authority. Progress on SSR is also hampered by a lack of decentralized decision making amongst the civil and military authority, requiring the highest levels of approvals for the most minor of issues.

⁴⁵ See: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52122.htm accessed 9 August 2017. The primary role of this NATO Military Liaison and Advisory Mission (NATO HQ Sarajevo) is to assist Bosnia and Herzegovina with defence reform. It also aims to help the country meet requirements for its participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. NATO HQ Sarajevo undertakes certain operational tasks such as counter-terrorism while ensuring force protection, support to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, with the detention of persons indicted for war crimes, and intelligence-sharing with the European Union. In sum, the NATO HQ Sarajevo complements the work of the EU mission with specific competencies.

⁴⁶ Ingrid Olstad Busterad, "Defense sector reform in the Western Balkans – different approaches and different tools" *European Security*, 24:2, 12 October 2016, pp. 335-352, see 340.



Projecting Stability – An Old-New NATO Role in the Western Balkans

External spoilers and a lack of unity of command or effort amongst the key Western nations, Alliance members, and the international community combine to retard progress in BiH toward MAP implementation. Lack of capacity for effective defense institution building, inefficient defense procurement mechanisms, and legacy military issues from the Cold War and conflicts of the 1990s further impede such progress.

Whilst effective in their own right, each NATO element in the Western Balkans is failing to deter the re-emergence of nationalism, renewed imperial aspirations, and the traction being gained by religious extremism. NATO might well be the last chance to restart progress within this region toward normalization of relations and integration with Europe.

If this is to be successful, NATO needs to consider making four distinct improvements to its posture in the Western Balkans:

First, the Alliance should consider the establishment of a Western Balkan Theatre of Operations under a single NATO commander responsible for all Alliance activities in the region, and through whom Alliance member state activities must be coordinated. There simply is no substitute for unity of command, especially when DCB activities and MAP implementations need be coordinated across inter-entity and international borders to ensure that progress in one place does not cause reversal in another. It is not enough to plan for projected stability within sepa-

rate states of the region. A first criteria for success in pushing SSR and bringing nations forward in the MAP is unity of effort amongst the numerous international organizations and between various Alliance member states operating independently throughout the Western Balkans.⁴⁷ Unity of military effort can only be assured through unity of command. Designation of NATO HQ Sarajevo as the single theatre command for what would essentially be an expandable Joint Task Force – Western Balkans, provides one manner to achieve unity of military command, placing the HQ exactly where lies the toughest problem of the region.

Second, the Alliance needs to increase its DCB and MAP efforts. NATO must plan and act to prevent backslide through revamped soft stability projection under a single regional commander. To enhance work with international organizations, the Alliance might consider greater communications and information-sharing, using the co-location of international offices to establish common classification for shared areas of operations (as was done in Afghanistan), and enhanced use of information through liaison teams to create better situational awareness. NATO might also facilitate better intelligence exchange between Western Balkans Partners using the same liaison team structure. Alliance PfP tools and action in Individual Partner Action Plans (IPAPs) might be better focused to specific regional security challenges and increase cross-border and regional links.

The biggest change required to DCB and MAP processes in BiH, however, needs to be in Alliance thinking. There is a clear requirement to take these efforts more seriously by increasing the size and scope

⁴⁷ Ingrid Olstad Busterad, "Defense sector reform in the Western Balkans – different approaches and different tools" *European Security*, 24:2, 12 October 2016, pp. 335-352, see 336.



of NATO-sponsored military training, education, equipage, and force development. The practice of forcing NATO HQ Sarajevo to beg Alliance member embassies to uphold and coordinate various independent DCB reforms must cease. In its place, the HQ Sarajevo must receive the mandate to coordinate all member activities and resources to fill gaps in the capacity building spectrum. Using Alliance experience and expertise acquired in NATO Training Missions – Iraq and Afghanistan, NATO should create a large DCB and train and equip mission that can break through the existing barriers to integration of BiH forces into a singular national Army. The importance of national armies in the creation of a state is fact in European and North American history, and this historical perspective is required in establishing effective NATO efforts in BiH. In this effort, consideration must also be given to having a portion of the BiH recruits (and even Kosovo's) enter the army via selective service mechanism, to allow social integration to occur amongst a greater percentage of the population each year.

Fourth, the Alliance should extend thinking about projecting stability in the Western Balkans to include the type and size of military intervention conducted in the late 1990s. Using the Enhanced NATO Response Force created out of the 2014 Wales Summit, the Alliance should produce and advertise (using unclassified disclosure) the existence of contingency plans to project the VJTF and Follow-on forces into the Western Balkans if required. Re-establishment of a designated and credible over-the-horizon fighting capability, rapidly deployable, as last seen in SFOR, could create greater confidence

in the region. This should therefore be a military option open to public knowledge and awareness. In fact, Partner countries in the Western Balkans should be invited to participate within VJTF contingency forces structures. The struggle facing the EU, OSCE, UN and NATO in the Western Balkans is one of confidence of the populations of the region. No amount of rhetoric regarding central and western European commitment to integrating these states will suffice in raising waning levels of confidence in these populations. Messaging of NATO intent to use VJTF, and follow-on forces if necessary, could reverse this. NATO has a forward presence in the Western Balkans, and this footprint could facilitate easier expansion of NATO activity when required. However, creation of a NATO Force Integration Unit within the Balkans, especially if placed under a single theatre Joint Task Force HQ, would greatly facilitate VJTF planning and deployment. Inclusion within the VJTF of Western Balkan partner units would add legitimacy and perhaps leverage to its use. Exercising the use of the VJTF into the Western Balkans would have a positive effect on stability and confidence and perhaps dissuade external players from acting more aggressively in Kosovo and BiH.⁴⁸

Conclusion

With the reduction in EU and NATO mission strength over the past decades, there have been many missed opportunities for positive engagement to mitigate the emerging problems in the Western Balkans. The EU and other organizations failed to adequately respond to the mass immigrant crisis of 2015, contributing to regional mismanagement

⁴⁸ Louisa. Brooke-Holland, *NATO's military response to Russia*, House of Commons Library (United Kingdom), eBook Publication November 2016, at; <http://research-briefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7276#fullreport> accessed 12 August 2017.



of migration, this resulting in reduced stability. Opportunists used the crisis to poke at old embers of ethnic tension. Weak governance and corruption continue to fail to curb organized crime, to stop the flow of illicit trade and human trafficking, or to deal with the significant unemployment issue. Equally weak education systems exacerbate a lack of reconciliation and unemployment, especially among youth, leading to economic emigration. The populations in many regions of the Western Balkans grow frustrated by family-based or clan-based power arrangements that connect political elites and organized crime and Chinese economic opportunists that feed upon the lack of power and agency of common people, and upon weak civil society. At the same time, overt soft power influence by Russia and the Gulf States work to create fears amongst Muslim and Orthodox and Catholic Christians alike about the prospect for renewed sectarian and ethnic violence. This provides ammunition for posturing by nationalist politicians, which impedes progress toward integration in BiH and Kosovo and Serbia, and creates potential for violence in FYRoM.

Centrifugal forces, mostly coming from external sources outside of the region, are working to slow and arrest progress in the Western Balkans' movement toward integration into Europe. It may be that these external pulses reveal the slow emergence of new imperial designs spurred by nostalgia in Russia and China, or by generational aspirations by Gulf States. Some agencies have claimed that progress has stopped and backsliding has commenced. Others suggest that glacial progress is sufficient, provided that the region does not revert to violence on a scale that would threaten the rest of Europe. Some quietly state the answer lies in the division of BiH and Kosovo, perhaps leading to a 'greater Serbia' or a 'greater Croatia'. What is clear from such musings is that power brokers across the region, and their supporters in nations outside of the region, have not embraced as inevitable, or even desirable, European

and American designs to integrate these states into the community of Western liberal democracies. Fukuyama's ideological evolution, that would make such democracies the final form of human government in every state, appears to be failing in the Western Balkans. There, history, or at least the appropriation of history by nationalists and fundamentalists, still holds great currency.

What is needed from NATO in the Western Balkans is an overarching operational theatre design linking all NATO and partner activity and locations, preventing a 'Balkanization' of our collective efforts. Given the scale of the threats and challenges to the region, the Alliance would be prudent to be more overt in its discussions of stability projection to specifically include the entirety of the Western Balkans, treating it as a single operational theatre, with the aim of denying China freedom of action to derail European integration processes, and preventing Russia and Islamist groups operational space within the Balkans. This can be achieved by unifying NATO command within the region, by expanding and enhancing NATO military-to-military capacity building and MAP activities into a single coordinated regional effort, and by designing a Western Balkans theatre plan and Command and Control architecture (including NFIU) for deployment of VJTF and follow-on NRF capabilities should a variety of situations warrant this. These efforts must be a strategic objective for the Alliance, lest history once more exact revenge there by flesh and blood.

