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## *The Western Balkans into NATO: security perspectives*

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## ***Introduction***

The Western Balkans represent a region of strategic importance for the Atlantic Alliance, whose stability, security, and integration within the Euro-Atlantic community has been a priority on the NATO agenda for almost three decades, finding, among the majority of the six Countries that make up the area, a converging interest.

The evolution of the international context and the return of strategic competition have further emphasized the relevance of the many forms with which the Alliance is engaged in the region, demonstrating how there still exist fragilities, vulnerabilities, and critical issues that can be exploited by both internal and external adversaries, in order to influence and threaten NATO's southeastern flank and the very national security of the States, whether members, partners or neutrals, located there.

Indeed, the Western Balkans are affected by hybrid operations conducted by the Russian Federation, recognized by NATO Strategic Concept 2022 as the most significant and direct threat to the Alliance Countries<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, they are increasingly involved in multifaceted initiatives by the People's Republic of China, designated by the same document as a source of systemic challenges to NATO security<sup>2</sup>. Analyzing the Atlantic Alliance's posture, goals and strategy in the region and delving into the state of the art of the transformation process of the security apparatuses of the relevant Countries in the area allows to outline the prospects of this important NATO border quadrant.

## ***The strategic importance of the Western Balkans for NATO***

The strategic significance of the Western Balkans is multifactorial in nature and has underpinned the Atlantic Alliance's engagement in the region since the 1990s, first with out-of-area operations, then with a stable military presence and especially through the subsequent implementation of the Partnership for Peace with the Countries of the region, progressively securing NATO membership for three of them<sup>3</sup>. The area is in fact a historically central connecting point between Europe, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, still essential for the trade routes that link them.

Exemplary and relevant, especially in an era of pervasive energy weaponization, is the advantage the Balkans offer for gas and oil pipeline routes coming from the Caspian Sea and destined for the Old Continent, over the potential, more expensive and articulated routes across the Bosphorus<sup>4</sup>. The region then wedges between the eastern and southern flanks of the Atlantic Alliance, playing a key role in the overall compactness and security of the Euro-Atlantic front.

In view of these factors, the aforementioned NATO Strategic Concept 2022, while halving the space devoted to the region in the previous 2010 document, not only textually acknowledges the strategic relevance of the area, structurally linking it to the stability of the Black Sea as well, but also reaffirms Brussels' resolve to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Countries in the region<sup>5</sup>. Underlining the diverse spectrum of hybrid and asymmetric threats plaguing the area, from influence operations to jihadist radicalism, from transnational organized crime to ethnically or politically inspired paramilitary organizations, the document affirms NATO's readiness to support the Western Balkans' capability development by coordinating with them in addressing common challenges from any external theater.

Therefore, the region not only represents one of the largest and long-established geographic areas of political investment for the Alliance, but more importantly, it constitutes a historical unicum of

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<sup>1</sup> NATO Heads of State and Government, *NATO Strategic Concept 2022* (NATO Madrid Summit, June 29, 2022), 4.

<sup>2</sup> NATO Heads of State and Government, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová, *Peace and Security in the Western Balkans, A Local Perspective* (Routledge, August 16, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> General Renzo Pegoraro, *La strategia della NATO nei Balcani Occidentali* (Panorama Internazionale, April 2005).

<sup>5</sup> NATO Heads of State and Government, *op. cit.*, 11.

progressive intersection of NATO's three Core Tasks, namely 1) Deterrence and Defense, 2) Crisis Prevention and Management, and 3) Cooperative Security<sup>6</sup>.

First and foremost, the Member States' focus on the Western Balkans has been inspired from the outset by the idea of preventing the development of security vacuums at their borders, according to the principle that the Alliance's defense also depends on the stability of its neighbors. The military devices deployed in the area have indeed imposed a deterrent against escalations of violence, preventing tensions from escalating back into open conflict.

### ***External factors of destabilization***

The Atlantic Alliance pays increasing attention to effects and implications arising from the involvement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China in the area<sup>7</sup>, particularly by assessing the potential destabilizing consequences of Moscow's and Beijing's actions, whether these are generated by malicious intent or result from negative externalities of legitimate foreign policy initiatives.

In detail, the Kremlin has had close bilateral relations with Serbia for decades and has strong connections with some nationalist groups in Belgrade. In fact, as early as 2014, personnel from a paramilitary formation called the Cethnic Guards took part in the actions that resulted in the Russian annexation of Crimea<sup>8</sup>, and after Russian aggression against Ukraine, in February 24, 2022, as the conflict between Moscow and Kiev continued, some members of these organizations went to the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine to fight alongside the Russian Armed Forces<sup>9</sup>. In addition, in the past year and a half there has been an intensification of operations in the Serbian information environment by the Russian Federation, with the plausible aim of consolidating a positive perception of the Kremlin in local public opinion while promoting an aversion to NATO that could dangerously degrade regional stability<sup>10</sup>.

The People's Republic of China, on the other hand, over the past five years has developed a comprehensive network of economic investments, especially in the energy and infrastructure sectors, as well as activities and initiatives in culture, research, education, and mass media, also collaborating with local political formations and government entities<sup>11</sup>. Beijing has also offered significant financing, sometimes generating relevant dependencies for recipient Countries, as in the case of Montenegro, where, with a debt-to-GDP ratio close to 100 percent, more than half of the liabilities are held by the People's Republic. China's approach to the Western Balkans is implemented both through bilateral relations, among which the one with Serbia is the most long-standing and is expanding to the Defense sphere<sup>12</sup>, and concurrently with the "16 plus 1" Framework of the Cooperation Initiative between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries, launched in 2012<sup>13</sup>, but increasingly implemented since 2021.

Beijing has demonstrated, in addition, a propensity to change the type of local actors to engage with, progressively moving from relationships solely at the central government level to widespread

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<sup>6</sup> NATO Heads of State and Government, op. cit., 3.

<sup>7</sup> Michal Szczerba, *The Western Balkans: Russia's War on Ukraine and the Region's Enduring Challenges* (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, March 28, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> United States Army Special Operations Command, "*Little Green Men*": *A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013–2014* (Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 2015), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandar Vasovic, *Serbia asks Russia to end recruitment of its people for Ukraine war* (Reuters, January 17, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost and Baptiste Henry, *Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro* (Clingendael Report, August 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Branislav Stanicek and Simona Tarpova, *China's strategic interests in the Western Balkans* (European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2022).

<sup>12</sup> Ana Krstinovska, Bledar Feta, Aleksandra Stankovic, Senada Selo Sabic, Aleksandra Davitkovska-Spasovska and Momcilo Radulovic, *China's Influence on the Western Balkans' EU Accession Process: Synergies and Obstacles* (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Skopje, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Gisela Grieger, *China, the 16+1 format and the EU* (European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2018).

interactions with non-governmental, local, and civil society entities. The arising of these potential challenges tends to reinforce the centrality of the Western Balkans in the NATO agenda, embedding it as one of the quadrants in which global competition with rivals and contenders materializes<sup>14</sup>.

### **6WB: State of the Art**

Since the early 2000s, with different forms and objectives and under a cooperative security perspective, all six Western Balkan States have joined the Alliance's Partnership for Peace Program. While Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have participated in the intent of becoming NATO members, reached in 2009, 2017 and 2020 respectively, and while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, net of internal frictions and differing timetables, also maintain similar aspirations, Serbia since voluntarily joining the program had expressed its intent to remain neutral, still willing to contribute to regional stability.

The three Countries in the region that have joined NATO, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, are currently integrated and actively contributing with their forces in initiatives that ensure deterrence on the Alliance's eastern flank, particularly contextually to the Enhanced Forward Presence and for Tirana also in the Enhanced Vigilance Activity. This same Countries are in addition beneficiaries of Air Policing missions for the protection of allied airspace, through capabilities and assets provided by Italy and Greece.

Kosovo is furthermore the theater of NATO's main and largest crisis prevention and management operation outside the Alliance's borders, thanks to the Kosovo Force (KFOR). Launched in June 1999 on the basis of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244<sup>15</sup> and confirmed after Pristina's declaration of independence in 2008, the mission currently has about 4,500 military personnel and is dedicated to maintaining a safe and secure environment and guaranteeing freedom of movement to local communities<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, NATO personnel serve as third-party, neutral mediators between the Serbian and Kosovar sides, helping to enable and inform the European Union – thus facilitating the dialogue between the two Countries.

The development of the relation between each single Country in the area and the Atlantic Alliance have finally been widely paralleled by strategic-security trajectories geared toward consolidating regional stability and in many cases furthering the integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Although these dynamics have pervasively involved entire Country Systems, particularly with a widespread view to future membership in the European Union, those in the military sector present a specific relevance to NATO.

### **Albania**

Among the Western Balkan States, Albania was the first one to join the Alliance and it is still pursuing a structured modernization process of its security sector, devoted, on the one hand, to improving the conditions of service of personnel and to strengthening ties with civil society, and on the other hand, to bringing its Armed Forces up to NATO standards. The Albanian Ministry of Defense has outlined these courses of action through three policy documents published in 2022, namely the Defense Directive<sup>17</sup>, the Integrity Plan 2022-2025<sup>18</sup>, and the Development Plan 2022-2031. While the former focuses on institutional reforms, capacity building in the cyber domain and greater contribution to regional stability, the latter indicates improving the quality, competence, and readiness of infantry units as the priority in NATO terms, while the third outlines the future

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<sup>14</sup> Marina Vulović, *Western Balkan Foreign and Security Ties with External Actors* (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, February 8, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1244* (New York, June 10, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> NATO, *KFOR Key Facts & Figures* (October 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, *Defense Directive 2022* (February 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Albania, *Integrity Plan 2022-2025* (April 2022).

organization and configuration of the Tirana Armed Forces. Albania is among the beneficiary Countries of the Atlantic Alliance's Air Policing missions and has also invested in upgrading its Kuçova military airport into a NATO tactical air base. Although the Albanian defense branch does not hold autonomous projection capabilities of its forces, Tirana currently deploys more than a hundred military personnel in allied activities, with an infantry platoon deployed in Bulgaria as part of the Enhanced Vigilance Activity, a bomb disposal platoon in Latvia as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence, and about sixty operators engaged in KFOR<sup>19</sup>.

### **Montenegro**

Montenegro was the second Country to join NATO and it is still prioritized in integrating into the Organization's structures. Although Podgorica has adhered to the Alliance's capability goals and aligned its planning process in the Defense sector to those goals, significant delays persist in the reforms and professionalization of its Armed Forces. Particular attention is assigned to the acquisition and integration of communication systems updated to NATO standards in order to improve interoperability with the allies. Montenegro Armed Forces is a territorial defence tool, without projection capabilities. This is one of the reasons why its involvement in NATO's crisis management operations is at the centre of an active political debate, especially with reference to Montenegro's participation in KFOR. As a result, Podgorica has deployed only a dozen military personnel, mostly for the Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia, with only one operator assigned to KFOR<sup>20</sup>.

### **North Macedonia**

North Macedonia was the latest, between Western Balkans Countries, to join the Atlantic Alliance, becoming its 30th Member State. Skopje's Defense Strategy was published a few months before its 2020 entry and contains significant goals aimed at capability, procedural, and organizational alignment with NATO, pursuing the resolute orientation toward collective defense, cooperative security and crisis management tasks already outlined in the 2019-2028 Defense Capability Development Plan and updated by its review in 2020<sup>21</sup>. Despite its recent entry, North Macedonia has implemented appreciable progress, already having some units participating in NATO-led operations. The Skopje Armed Forces regularly contribute to multinational allied exercises and are engaged with 80 total military personnel in KFOR, in Latvia, with the Enhanced Forward Presence, as well as in Iraq, concurrently with NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)<sup>22</sup>.

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Bosnia and Herzegovina has been an Atlantic Alliance partner since it joined the Partnership for Peace in 2006 and submitted an Action Plan for NATO membership in 2010. However, its entry has been delayed by a number of internal issues, including the issue of buildings and installations owned by the Ministry of Defence and the resurgence of ethnic tensions with the Serb community and the possibility of a withdrawal of its members from the Armed Forces. Sarajevo, however, continues to pursue its 2017-2027 Defense Modernization, Development and Reform Plan, resolutely inspired to achieve organizational and capability standards consistent with NATO aspirations, including representatives of all three major local ethnic groups in the operational and decision-making apparatuses. As a partner, Bosnia and Herzegovina periodically sends observers to

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<sup>19</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2023* (Routledge, February 2023), 72.

<sup>20</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, op. cit., 114.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of North Macedonia, *Long-Term Defense Capability Development Plan 2019-2028* (2020).

<sup>22</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, op. cit., 112.



some Atlantic Alliance missions and exercises, but currently has no capability to deploy and logistically support its own military personnel outside national borders<sup>23</sup>.

### **Kosovo**

Kosovo presents a more complex situation, with its Security Forces, founded in 2009, undergoing transformation to full-fledged Armed Forces on the 2028 horizon, following the establishment of the Ministry of Defense in 2014<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, Pristina maintains a well-established propensity to develop a modern military apparatus inspired by NATO standards and oriented toward joining the Atlantic Alliance. However, there are perplexities among Member States about the appropriateness of such a prospect, and Brussels appears formally opposed to this scenario in the short term. The Country's stability and security is still highly dependent on the substantial presence of KFOR<sup>25</sup>.

### **Serbia**

Finally, Serbia is the only Western Balkan State pursuing the goal of European Union membership with no intention of joining the Atlantic Alliance. Belgrade, which identified the possible extension of international recognition of Kosovo among the main threats to its security in its 2021 National Security Strategy<sup>26</sup>, has nevertheless agreed to strengthen cooperation with NATO through an Individual Partnership Action Plan. In Serbia's view, however, this is not in contrast to a parallel maintenance of relations, in the defense sector, with the Russian Federation and increasingly with the People's Republic of China, from which the Belgrade Armed Forces have recently acquired weapon systems, especially for air defense. This approach is also reflected in the training and educational sphere, where the Serbian military branch participates in exercises with regional neighbors, Moscow and also, on a bilateral basis, with NATO Countries<sup>27</sup>.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, the analysis of the different trajectories and strategic postures of the Western Balkan States highlights, on the one hand, the composite nature of the region and, on the other, the pervasive role that the Atlantic Alliance's articulations play in fostering stability in the quadrant and promoting the very security of the Countries on NATO's southeastern flank. This task, whose close coordination with the European Union's initiatives for inclusive enlargement to the area appears effective, is even more relevant with the emergence, and re-emergence, of hybrid threats and tensions in the area.

The perspective of a stronger integration of the region into NATO, being it through further memberships, enhanced partnerships or stronger informal cooperation, likely represent the only tool to prevent the increase of a widened influence of competitors up to hamper or deny the Alliance access and initiatives in the area.

The passivity of opposing actors, being them State or non-State, intra-regional or extra-regional, should not be however taken for granted and their ability to interfere in a positive interaction of and with NATO should not be underestimated. The clashes between protesters and KFOR riot units in May 2023<sup>28</sup>, and even more significantly, the attack conducted by some 30 finely equipped and armed militiamen around the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo in September 2023<sup>29</sup>, remind

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<sup>23</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, op. cit., 76.

<sup>24</sup> Government Defense Integrity Index, *Country Brief: Kosovo* (Transparency International – Defense & Security, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, op. cit., 129.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia* (2021).

<sup>27</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, op. cit., 128.

<sup>28</sup> Fatos Bytyci, *NATO soldiers injured in Kosovo clashes with Serb protesters* (Reuters, May 30, 2023).

<sup>29</sup> Fatos Bytyci, *Exclusive: Kosovo's president blames Serbia for shootout, says Kosovo 'under attack'* (Reuters, September 28, 2023).

how the Atlantic Alliance's focus and action in the Western Balkans, especially in an era of increasing and renewed multilevel competition, cannot degrade both for the future of the region and for NATO's security.