

A Balancing Act?

Serbia's Military Neutrality: Concept and Implementation

Kiegyensúlyozás?

Szerbia katonai semlegessége: koncepció és megvalósítás

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Abstract: The aim of present study is to provide a concise review of Serbia's military neutrality, both the conditions of its "genesis" in 2007 and its "operationalization" in form of strategic documents and military cooperation during the period of Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) government (2012-2021), with special emphasis on the presidency of Aleksandar Vučić (2017-2021). The paper concluded that the "genesis" and maintenance of Serbian neutrality is due to both internal political considerations, as well as Serbian diplomatic exigencies with regards to the unresolved status of Kosovo. The long-term sustainability of Serbian neutrality policy, however, cannot be taken for granted. The delicate „balancing act" between the West, Russia, and increasingly, China, might not be sustainable in the future if relations between the West (and in particular, the EU) and China or Russia, deteriorate further, or when Serbia's EU accession process enters its „final stretch".

Keywords: military neutrality, non-alignment, multi-vector foreign policy, military cooperation, Serbia-NATO relations, Serbia-Russia relations, Serbia-China relations

Összefoglalás: *Jelen tanulmány célja, hogy röviden összefoglalja Szerbia semlegességét, annak 2007-es "születését", majd megvalósulását a stratégiai dokumentumokban és katonai együttműködésekben a Szerb Progresszív Párt kormányzásának (2012-2017) idején, különös tekintettel Aleksandar Vučić elnökségére (2017-2021). A tanulmány azt a következtetést vonja le, hogy a semlegesség megszületése és fenntartása egyrészt a belpolitikai megfontolások miatt, másrészt a Koszovó megoldatlan státuszából fakadó szerb diplomáciai kényszer miatt valósult meg. A szerb semlegességi politika hosszú távú fenntartását azonban nem vehetjük magától értetődőnek. A kényes egyensúlyozás a Nyugat, Oroszország, és egyre inkább Kína között nem biztos, hogy fenntartható lesz a jövőben, ha a Nyugat (különösen az EU), valamint Kína és Oroszország között tovább romlik a viszony, vagy ha Szerbia Európai Unió csatlakozási folyamata a végső szakaszba lép.*

Kulcsszavak: *katonai semlegesség, el nem kötelezett, multi-vektorális külpolitika, katonai együttműködés, Szerbia-NATO kapcsolatok, Szerbia-Oroszország kapcsolatok, Szerbia-Kína kapcsolatok*

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Serbia is unique among Western Balkan nations for neither having joined NATO nor aspiring to be a NATO member state. The country declared to be militarily neutral "towards existing military alliances" (National

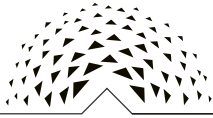
Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 2007, Novakovic 2012, 3) in late 2007, amid the looming independence of Kosovo, and no doubt influenced by the events of the 1990, when NATO intervened militarily against the Bosnian Serb military forces in 1995 and against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999. (Ejdus 2014a, 46-47). This paper aims to investigate both the political and foreign policy circumstances which led to the declaration of military neutrality in 2007, and how, once declared, that neutrality was “operationalized” in Serbian defence policy. For that aim we review the strategic documents (in particular the National Security Strategy and Defence Strategy) adopted since 2007, and Serbia’s military cooperation with three major political actors: the Western alliance (United States, NATO, and major NATO member states), the Russian Federation, and the People’s Republic of China. Due to constraints of size, the latter analysis will be restricted to the period of Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) government (2012-2021), and in particular, the presidency of Aleksandar Vučić (2017-2021).

The paper is divided into five parts. While it is not possible to provide a comprehensive treatment of the question of neutrality, in the first part we aim to offer a short conceptual and historical introduction to that concept. In the second part we review the political and foreign policy circumstances under which Serbian neutrality was declared in 2007, as we noted earlier, this step was taken due to both internal and external “impulses”. The third and fourth part of the paper is dedicated to the issue of the “operationalization” of Serbian neutrality in two particular areas, national strategy documents (National Security Strategy and Defence Strategy) and international military cooperation. In the last chapter of our paper, in lieu of conclusion, we offer a preliminary assessment on Serbian military neutrality during the period in question, as well as the future prospects of its sustainability.

NEUTRALITY: A CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL PRIMER

While in this paper it is not possible to offer a detailed treatment of the historical evolution of the concept of neutrality, it is important to emphasize that since the emergence of the first permanently neutral state in modern Europe (the neutrality of Switzerland was recognized at the Congress of Vienna in 1815), this concept showed a remarkable degree of adaptation to historical and geopolitical changes (Radoman 2019, 4-6, Novakovic 2012, 4).

The original concept of a neutral state was defined primarily in context of an armed conflict. For example, the 5th Hague Convention of 1907 defined the rights and duties of neutral states in wartime, among them, the inviolability of the neutral state’s borders, and prohibition for the warring parties to use the neutral state’s territory to transport troops and military equipment, or to recruit military personnel



from the neutral state. Among the main attributes of a *permanently neutral state*, Cyril E. Black highlighted the following: a) abstention of participating in armed conflict, b) self-reliance in national defence resources, c) foreign policy course designed to prevent future involvement in any hostilities (Black 1968, cited by Novakovic 2012, 4).

Among the main challenges to neutrality during the 20th century we might mention the violation of neutrality during wartime (the case of Belgium during WWI, and the Benelux nations, Denmark and Norway during WWII), the idea of collective security in the interwar era, and particularly after WWII, and most importantly, the onset of the Cold War and emergence of the bipolar world order. While the above-mentioned neutral states abandoned this orientation and joined to the NATO alliance, Switzerland and Sweden held to their status during the Cold War era, and two new militarily neutral countries (Austria and Finland) emerged during this period (Novakovic 2012, 5-6, Radoman 2019, 6-7).

The emergence, during the late 1950s, of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), mostly composed of recently independent African and Asian nations, can be interpreted as a response to the bipolar world order. The movement also represented a strong normative agenda: while European neutrals either implicitly or explicitly accepted the bipolar European and world order and positioned themselves in that order, the NAM defined itself in opposition to the superpower confrontation, and aimed at the substantive change of international political and financial relations (Novakovic 2012, 6, Radoman 2019, 9-10, 14, 16). The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which left the Soviet bloc in the wake of the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, was one of the founding members of NAM, and participated in its activities until the dissolution of the state in 1991. The term “non-alignment” itself was first used by India and Yugoslavia in 1950, during the UN debate on the Korean War (Goldstein and Goldstein 2020, 637). It is important to notice that although Yugoslavia was not part of the Soviet bloc and maintained friendly relations with different Western states and organizations, its policy and rhetoric on major issues of world affairs was frequently very similar to the prevailing Soviet line at the time (Novakovic 2012, 10-11, Radoman 2019, 16-17).

The end of the Cold War, increasing globalization and emergence of new security threats (such as global terrorism, state failure, etc.), and the introduction and evolution of the common foreign, security and defence policies of the European Union forced European neutrals to reappraise and adapt their status to these new challenges (Ejdus 2014a, 46, Radoman 2019, 26-27). Those states which became EU members in the 1990s (Sweden, Finland, and Austria, with Ireland being a member state since 1973) gradually redefined their security policy orientation as “military non-alignment”. This redefinition generally involved embracing the collective security approach, which can be illustrated by the fact that even Switzerland, generally subscribing to a strict interpretation of neutrality, joined both the United Nations and NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme in this period (Rickli 2008, Novakovic 2012, 8-9).

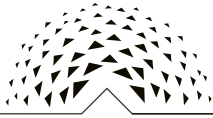
However, it is important to emphasize that in the framework of the European integration, both the Treaty of Nice (2001) as well as the Lisbon Treaty (2009) contains explicit references (such as the so-called Irish Clause of the Lisbon Treaty) to the unique situation of member states with a neutral status. In sum, it is possible to conclude that a strict and absolute interpretation of neutrality is no longer possible particularly for an EU member state amid the contemporary security environment, nevertheless neutrality continues to be part of not only the security posture but also the political identity of several European countries. (Novakovic 2012, 8-9). In case of neutral EU members, EU and NATO membership is, and continues to be treated as separate issues. In contrast, most of the post-Communist nations aimed or currently aim to join both organizations.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE “GENESIS” OF SERBIAN NEUTRALITY

Attitudes of the Serbian society toward NATO and relations with NATO were and are inevitably conditioned by the role the Alliance played in the 1990s Balkans conflict. NATO intervention against the Bosnian Serbs in 1995 and, more importantly, the NATO bombardment of the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 during the Kosovo conflict led to a lingering hostility towards NATO in most of the Serbian public opinion (Makai 2014, 37-38, Ejodus 2014a, 45-46). Even though the fundamental attitudes on this issue remained unchanged, the question was somewhat put on the back burner during the earlier years of the post-Milosevic era. (Novakovic 2012, 10).

Relations with NATO were gradually improving, with the Alliance providing defence reform assistance to the then State Union of Serbia-Montenegro and Serbia was admitted to NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 2006, after the dissolution of the State Union. The Partnership for Peace, unlike the Membership Action Plan (MAP) is not a “preparatory stage” to accession to the Alliance, and in Serbia, membership was neither pursued, nor considered realistic at the short term by policymakers (Ejodus 2014a, 48, Makai 2014, 38-39).

Two closely related events in the course of 2007 led to the issue of NATO relations again taking center stage in Serbian politics: the intensification of internal tension between two main groups of the original anti-Milosevic opposition, in power at that time, and the Kosovo final status negotiations. The Ahtisaari plan, published in February 2007, envisaged an independent Kosovo in whose “supervised independence” NATO would continue to play a prominent role. Although Serbia rejected the plan as unacceptable, it became clear during the course of 2007 that the major Western powers would be willing to support the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo, without a prior agreement in the UN Security Council. (Ejodus 2014a, 48-49, Makai 2014, 39-40). That situation led to the emergence of a



schism between the governing parties. The more reformist, pro-Western parties, led by President Boris Tadić and his Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka, DS) favoured balancing the relations with the West with the need to preserve the territorial integrity of Serbia, while the more nationalistic wing of the governing coalition, led by the Serbian Democratic Party (*Demokratska Stranka Srbije*, DSS) of Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, openly started to advocate for military neutrality or non-alignment (Ejdus 2014a, 48-49).

In September 2007, the leadership of the DSS party adopted a party programme which openly opposed Serbian NATO membership, and a month later it passed a *Declaration on Military Neutrality* (Ejdus 2014a, 50). The fact that President Tadić, and the DS party finally acquiesced to the Koštunica-DSS line and voted for the parliamentary resolution which contained explicit mention of Serbian military neutrality has also much to do with the approaching presidential elections. Tadić apparently was banking on existing anti-NATO sentiment in Serbian society to aid his 2008 re-election bid against the candidate of Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka*, SRS), who was consistently anti-NATO from the outset (Ejdus 2014a, 51).

The resolution, titled "*On the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia*" was adopted on the 26 December 2007 session of the National Assembly, with a large majority of 220 out of 250 deputies. It is important to mention that military neutrality is mentioned only as part of a resolution reaffirming territorial integrity of Serbia and rejecting the Ahtisaari plan. The declaration of neutrality was justified in that text by both the 1999 NATO bombing of the FRY, as well as the role envisaged for the alliance in an independent Kosovo (Ejdus 2014a, 52, Radoman 2019, 165-166, Makai 2014, 40).

It is important to emphasize that unlike the practice of long-standing European neutrals (such as Austria) or more recent post-Soviet neutrals, like Moldova, the policy of neutrality is not incorporated in the constitution or other similar high-level legislative text. Moreover, the political declaration explicitly links any change of the neutral status is to the holding of a national referendum. (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, 2007).

Apart from the domestic political calculations, the declaration of neutrality had a diplomatic angle as well. When it became clear that Serbian rejection of the Ahtisaari plan will be not enough to stop Kosovo's independence, the government in Belgrade counted on Russia and China to block (by virtue of their Security Council veto) the UN membership of the new state. Therefore, catering to the well-known Russian opposition to NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe seemed a prudent course of action, even more so taking into account the long-standing pro-Russian sentiment of part of the Serbian public opinion. (Ejdus 2014a, 50-51)

Different interpretations have emerged on how the "genesis" of Serbian neutrality policy can be explained, and how it did survive until this day, even though its main architect, Vojislav Koštunica, has long lost his political prominence (Ejdus 2014a,

53). Apart from domestic political calculations, both Filip Ejdus (2014a, 2014b), Zorana Brozovic (2010) and Jelena Radoman (2019, 169-170) point out that the neutrality policy can be linked to an unresolved identity conflict in Serbian society between a pro-Western and a nationalist-sovereignist or pro-Russian orientation. Makai (2014, 40) argues that a political declaration adopted in a particular historical moment became a “dogma” in the peculiar Serbian political environment.

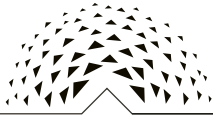
Neutrality served the purposes of subsequent governments as well. Radoman (2019, 171) argues that neutrality helped to pave the way to the cooperation of DS and the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička Partija Srbije*, SPS) of the late President Milosevic, by removing the sensitive political question of military-security orientation from the agenda. Likewise, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), in power since 2012, could use the neutrality policy to its benefit. By openly advocating for EU membership while reaffirming neutrality and ruling out NATO membership, SNS can appeal both to pro-Western and nationalist, or pro-Russian sections of the electorate. Neutrality as a political device again aided the cooperation between SNS and the more pro-Russian SPS while at the same time allowing SNS to position itself as a middle ground between the fringe pro-NATO parties - such as the Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberalna Demokratska Stranka*, LDS) - on one side and radical-right, anti-EU and anti-NATO forces - such as the Serbian Radical Party and DSS/Dveri - on the other. (Radoman 2019, 172-175).

In our interpretation it is possible, therefore, to conclude, that the declaration of military neutrality was a specific answer to a set of domestic and external challenges (internal political division on the question of relation with NATO and the West in general and the final status of Kosovo), and therefore it served political, rather than well-thought-out security policy purposes. One might argue that the “unplanned” nature of Serbian neutrality can explain the fact that for several years after 2007, it did not appear in formal security or defence policy documents. It is this issue of “operationalization” of Serbian neutrality to which we will now turn.

NEUTRALITY IN SERBIAN STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS

As the first part of our overview of the “operationalization” of Serbia’s military neutrality, in this section we will proceed with the overview of the two set of fundamental strategy documents the country adopted after neutrality was declared, the 2009 and 2019 National Security and Defence Strategies. Due to size constraints, most of our analysis will be centred on the most recent 2019 version, while the 2009 strategies will be reviewed only briefly.

The 2009 strategy was the first one Serbia adopted after the dissolution of its State Union with Montenegro in 2006, and its adoption was influenced by the unilateral declaration of Kosovo’s independence in 2008, as well as Serbian participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme (Radoman 2019, 137-138). In that strategy,



similarly to the subsequent 2019 one, threat perceptions and assessment of the regional security environment are chiefly informed by the disputed status of Kosovo, with separatism and security threats associated with the Kosovo situation taking center stage (Radoman 2019, 138-139). The documents can also be characterized by a notable ambivalence with regards to relations to NATO. Although the Alliance is only mentioned in context of Serbian participation in the PfP programme, the relations between Serbia and NATO are not clarified further (Radoman 2019, 138, 140.) This is in contrast with the more recent 2019 strategies where the prospect of NATO membership is explicitly ruled out (see National Security Strategy 2019, 24). Even more importantly, the concept of military neutrality is completely absent from both documents, thereby failing to offer more precise strategical guidance on how that status, declared two years earlier, has to be interpreted, and what are the implications of neutrality for Serbian defence policy going forward. (Radoman 2019, 141.)

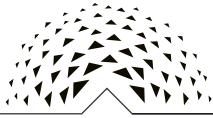
Both the 2009 Defence Strategy as well as the White Book on Defence, published in 2010, defines “total defence”¹ as the conceptual basis of Serbian defence policy. However, apart from referring to the concept “as an integral engagement of all defence actors and resources”, neither of the two documents offer detailed discussion thereof (Radoman 2019, 141).

Radoman (2019, 142) argues that the vagueness of the 2009 documents might have been intentional, as the country was still adjusting to independent statehood after the dissolution of the State Union, as well as the situation created by the independence of Kosovo, and the extent of international recognition of that state was still unclear. Moreover, according to the same author, military neutrality was not taken seriously at the time by the authors of both strategies, which might explain its absence, as well as the vagueness with regards to both threat perceptions as well as relations with NATO. (Radoman 2019, 142.)

The latest National Security and Defence Strategies, both adopted in 2019, feature major differences compared to their predecessors, while retaining their “Kosovo-centric” nature (European Western Balkans 2018).

Military neutrality is featured prominently in both documents, for example, the National Security Strategy among its starting points, lists “*preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, military neutrality, care for the Serbian people outside the borders of the Republic of Serbia, European integration and an effective rule of law*” (National Security Strategy 2019, 1). Likewise, the Defence Strategy declares in its first part: “*the commitments stated in the Defence Strategy express the determination of the Republic of Serbia, in accordance with the decision on military neutrality, to build and strengthen its own defence capabilities and capacities*” (Defence Strategy 2019, 1).

1 Total defence as a defence policy concept refers to the joint and coordinated application of military defence and civil defence, the latter broadly conceived, encompassing economic, social, psychological, etc. dimensions. The concept has a long-standing application in the Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden, Finland and Norway. See for example, Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 2018



Explicit declaration of military neutrality is coupled with likewise explicit exclusion of membership in “military political alliances”, in particular, NATO membership. However, the declared non-alignment is balanced by ambition to cooperate with such alliances. For example, the National Security Strategy states: *“The Republic of Serbia does not have any intention of becoming a NATO member, or any other military-political alliance, but it desires to advance mutual confidence and achieve common goals with all partners in the world”* (National Security Strategy 2019, 24).

Similar formulation can be found in the text of the Defence Strategy: *“[...] the Republic of Serbia declared military neutrality in relation to the existing military alliances, expressing its commitment to independent creation of its own defence policy. At the same time, it is involved in the implementation of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, participates in the Partnership for Peace programme, cooperates with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation”* (Defence Strategy 2019, 4) and *“military neutrality of the Republic of Serbia is not a barrier to its cooperation with other countries and military-political alliances.”* (Defence Strategy 2019, 15)

It is interesting to mention that the Defence Strategy, in line with the 2007 National Assembly Resolution, speaks of “existing” military alliances. From this language it is not completely clear what stance would be taken by the Serbian Government with regards to a hypothetical, newly formed military alliance in the future. The National Security Strategy, on the other hand uses the more general formulation “any other military alliances”.

In contrast, for example, the Austrian Federal Constitutional Law on Neutrality of 1955 states that *“...Austria will never in the future accede to any military alliances nor permit the establishment of military bases of foreign States on her territory.”* (Federal Constitutional Law on the Neutrality of Austria, 1955)

Although cooperation with NATO in the framework of Partnership for Peace programme is frequently mentioned in both strategies, several times it is mentioned together with cooperation with the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, in which Serbia is an observer since 2013, (see for example, National Security Strategy 2019, 7, 24, Defence Strategy 2019, 1,3,4, 15-17) even though the intensity of cooperation with the latter is much less significant (Radoman 2019, 150, CEAS 2018, 28).

Neither of the two strategies offer any detailed argument in favour of neutrality, or how that neutrality serves Serbia’s national interest, apart from declaring that it *“derives from its national values and interests and international status”* (Defence Strategy 2019, 8) and pointing out that by pursuing the neutrality policy, the country is carrying out the resolution of the National Assembly passed in 2007 (for example, Defence Strategy 2019, 4, 15).

Given the fact that Serbia opened its accession negotiations with the European Union in 2014, the strategies both feature several mentions of the foreign policy and Common Security and Defence Policy of the Union. Serbia is *“is involved in the implementation of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy”* (Defence Strategy

2019, 4), which *“continues to play an important role in crisis management and the stabilisation of situation in the areas of interest for the European Union.”* (Defence Strategy 2019, 3)

The Republic of Serbia also participates in the concept of EU Battlegroups, thereby *“further confirms its pro-European orientation and commitment to peace and security at the global and regional level.”*, pointing out that militarily neutral EU member states also participate in that concept (Defence Strategy 2019, 15).

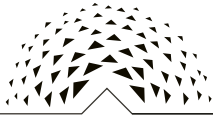
More importantly, the National Security Strategy proclaims that *“in the period until the accession to the European Union, the Republic of Serbia will continue gradually harmonising its foreign policy with the positions of the European Union, so that in the moment of obtaining membership, it would be fully harmonised with its foreign policy”* (National Security Strategy 2019, 26). The question of Serbian adherence to EU foreign policy positions is sensitive considering that since 2014, the country did not participate in EU sanctions against Russia and generally refuses to adhere to sanctions against entities which did not recognize Kosovo, such as Venezuela (Radoman 2019, 149-150)².

On the implications of military neutrality for the defence system and how it should be “operationalized” in practice, the strategies use similarly vague terms. The National Security Strategy points out that *“The Republic of Serbia seeks, as a militarily neutral state, to constantly improve its security system in order to achieve a more efficient response to security challenges, risks and threats”* (National Security Strategy 2019, 9), while the formulation used in the Defence Strategy is almost identical: *“The Republic of Serbia is committed, as a militarily neutral state, to constantly improving its defence system in order to be able to effectively respond to the defence challenges, risks and threats.”* (Defence Strategy 2019, 5).

The concept of “total defence” is mentioned four times in the text of the Defence Strategy, declaring that the strategic concept of defence is founded upon it, defining total defence by being *“primarily carried out by reliance on its own strengths and potentials”* (National Defence Strategy 2019, 18). According to the strategy, total defence includes *“military and civil defence, and it is planned, organised and implemented in the times of peace, emergency and war”* (Defence Strategy 2019, 18), but it partly relegates the precise formulation of its civil defence component to future legal and normative acts (Defence Strategy 2019, 10).

Total defence as a concept, is not without historical tradition in the ex-Yugoslav space, as the defence policy of Tito’s Yugoslavia (the system of *Opštenarodna Odbrana* or All-People’s Defence) from the late 1960s was partly based on that concept (see Roberts 1986, Dulic and Kostic 2010). Apart from that historical example, among the present-day European neutrals, the total defence concept is

2 For more on Serbia and the EU sanctions against Russia see Butnaru-Troncota 2019 and Ejodus 2014b. For a detailed discussion of Serbian adherence to EU foreign policy positions see Novakovic 2020.



applied by Sweden and Finland, among others (CEAS 2018, 32). However, neither of the strategies offer any conceptual guidance on how Serbia intends to implement the concept in its defence system (Radoman 2019, 150-152).

The defence strategy explicitly mentions Serbia's commitment to the maintenance of international peace and security by, among others, participation in international missions under the auspices of EU, United Nations and OSCE, adherence to arms control and non-proliferation efforts, and "*assistance and mediation in the peaceful resolution of international crises and conflicts*" (Defence Strategy 2019, 12-13). Similar formulation can be found in the National Security Strategy (National Security Strategy 2019, 21-22). Such commitment is in line with the historical practice of European neutrals like Sweden, Finland, and Switzerland (Radoman 2019, 148).

In sum, compared to the 2009 editions, the 2019 National Security and Defence Strategies offer a more open and resolute commitment to military neutrality, balanced by ambitions for cooperation with different political-military blocs (such as NATO and the Russia-led CSTO). Thus, this interpretation of military neutrality is not an isolationist policy and the authors of the strategy embrace, at least rhetorically, the agenda belonging to traditionally neutral states such as commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes and non-proliferation (Radoman 2019, 153).

However, the threat perceptions informing both strategies are still dominated by the unresolved Kosovo issue (like in the case of their 2009 antecedents), and in the assessment of regional and global security environment, its authors ignored the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the worsening relations of Russia and China with the USA and major Western states, or the enlargement of NATO in the Western Balkans (accession of Montenegro, invitation of North Macedonia to the Alliance) (CEAS 2018, 28-30, Radoman 2019, 154-155).

SERBIA'S NEUTRALITY AND MILITARY COOPERATION

As we saw in Serbia's current National Security and Defence Strategies, both military and diplomatic cooperation with different great powers and political-military alliances and „blocs” is an openly stated ambition of Serbian foreign and defence policy. Therefore, it is useful to review how that cooperation occurs in practice with special emphasis on three great powers or power blocs: the Western powers and NATO, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China. Due to size constraints, our discussion here cannot aim to be exhaustive. In this section we will concentrate on three aspects of military cooperation: procurement of weapons and weapons systems, military exercises and formal or informal frameworks of cooperation like NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Our review of events will put particular emphasis on the period of Aleksandar Vučić's presidency (2017-2021), also discussing prior events when relevant.

RELATIONS WITH NATO AND THE WESTERN POWERS

Notwithstanding the general negative social attitude in Serbia toward NATO, and the prevailing media narrative regarding Alliance affairs, Serbian cooperation with NATO can be considered intensive, particularly if we consider the fact that the country has no ambition to join the Alliance (Cuckic 2021). An important factor in Serbia-NATO relations is the presence of KFOR in Kosovo, which Belgrade considers crucial to the maintenance of stability and security in its erstwhile province, including the protection of Serbian minority and objects of cultural heritage (Defence Strategy 2019, 9-10, NATO 2021, Zivkovic 2019).

After first applying in 2003, Serbia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 2006, after the dissolution of the State Union of Serbia-Montenegro. Defence reform assistance was provided by NATO for the Serbian military through the government's Defence Reform Group. From 2010, Serbia also participates in NATO's Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the most intensive cooperation scheme designed for those countries who do not want to become members of the Alliance (Nic and Cingel 2014, 2-3, Vuksanovic 2020b, 6, Reid 2020, 1, 6).

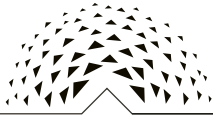
The first IPAP document was adopted by Serbia's government in 2015, with the second document following in late 2019. (European Western Balkans 2019a). In 2016, Serbia ratified a NATO Support and Procurement Organization (NSPO) agreement, granting certain tax exemptions and diplomatic immunity to the Alliance (Samorukov 2020, 17).

In the last few years, the Serbian government concluded two major arms procurement deals with NATO member France. In 2016, Belgrade and the Airbus company signed an agreement to procure six H145M helicopters for the Serbian armed forces and three for the police (Vojnovic 2019). During a two-day Serbian visit of President Macron of France in July 2019, a further deal was agreed between Paris and Belgrade to deliver 18 units of Mistral short-range air defence missile systems to the Serbian military (Knezevic 2019, Harangozó 2020, 4).

Several NATO nations also feature prominently among the biggest donors of the Serbian military: between 2007 and 2018, the United States donated 25 million USD worth of equipment, with Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom also placed in the top five (Cvetkovic 2019).

From 2006, when the country joined the PfP programme until 2018, Serbia's armed forces conducted more than 150 exercises together with NATO or individual NATO member states. The next year, 2019, presents a similar dynamic when 13 exercises involved NATO or its member states. (European Western Balkans 2017, BCSP 2018, Harangozó 2020, 5).

Notwithstanding the above-described degree and intensity of cooperation between NATO and Serbia, this is rarely reflected in public and media discourse. In most government friendly media outlets, NATO is usually described in neutral or negative terms, while Russian (and to a growing extent, Chinese) cooperation is presented in very positive terms. Therefore, it is not surprising that surveys carried



out in recent years show that the majority of the Serbian public is not informed about the real extent of cooperation with NATO and several misconceptions have taken root. For example, according to a 2018 NDI survey, 55% of Serbian respondents believed that Russian military capabilities exceed those of NATO nations while only 19% believed the opposite (Samorukov 2020, 22, Cuckic 2021).

RELATIONS WITH THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

When discussing Serbia's military ties with the Russian Federation a clarification with regards to the general nature of contemporary Serbian-Russian relations is in order. It is a common (mis)understanding both in Serbian as well as in parts of Western public opinion that Serbia maintains a close alliance with Moscow based on common cultural-spiritual heritage (Orthodox Christianity), as well as historical traditions of Russian role in the Balkans. In our view, echoing other Balkan watchers (see for example Bechev 2017, 4-6, Reid 2020, 8-9, Samorukov 2020, 4-7), this interpretation rather represents a carefully crafted political narrative instead of the prevailing reality. Even though the shared religious heritage is undeniable, and Russian soft power is frequently deployed based on the above narrative, the present-day Russo-Serbian cooperation has more to do with economic and geopolitical considerations. (Vuksanovic 2018, Samorukov 2020, 7-8)

With regards to the question of Kosovo, Belgrade relies on Russia to advocate for Serbian positions in the UN Security Council (where it has a veto), while Moscow is interested in keeping Serbia's neutral status as a bulwark against further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. (Samorukov 2019a, Nouwens and Ferris 2020, 4-5, 8-9). As long as Kosovo's status remains unresolved, it is in Belgrade's best interest to preserve the goodwill of its Russian ally. For Russia, however, the question of Kosovo is only a theatre of its geopolitical rivalry with the West, as well as – apart from energy infrastructure – its most effective instrument to project influence in the Balkans. Ideally, Russia would want to link the resolution of Kosovo to Western concessions on unrelated political issues, such as the question of Western sanctions, the situation of the Crimean Peninsula or the Syrian civil war (Harangozó 2020, 5-6, Vuksanovic 2020a, Vuksanovic 2020b).

Therefore, as Serbian and Russian interests do not align completely, the relationship between the two countries is necessarily fraught with distrust and the recent strains visible in that relationship prompted analyst Vuk Vuksanović to declare that “the partnership is past its prime” (Vuksanovic 2020a).

The lack of complete trust between the two countries can be illustrated by the 2019 spy scandal involving an official of the Russian embassy in Belgrade who was caught handing over money to officers of the Serbian armed forces. Less “serious” but still of symbolic significance was the issue of a social media post ridiculing President Aleksandar Vučić, published by the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry in the wake of the 2020 Washington Accords between Belgrade

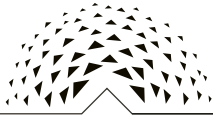
and Pristina, which prompted even Foreign Minister Lavrov to apologize to his Serbian counterpart (Zivanovic 2019a, Zivanovic 2019b, Voice of America 2020). Bilateral relations between Moscow and Belgrade are governed by the strategic cooperation agreement, which, along with a military-technical agreement was concluded by the two countries in 2013. In the same year Serbia also received observer status in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). An important institutional element in the security cooperation between Moscow and Belgrade is the presence of the Russo-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Niš, established in 2012. However, the operation of the center is an object of recurring diplomatic tension between the two countries, as Serbia is unwilling to grant diplomatic status to the center's staff, which NATO personnel on the other hand already enjoy since 2016 (Samorukov 2020, 19, Harangozó 2020, 6).

It is also important to point out that Belgrade's observer status in CSTO means very little in practical terms, as that organization does not have a framework of structured cooperation for non-members similar to NATO's Partnership for Peace (Samorukov 2020, 18).

With regards to Serbia's weapons procurement from Russia, it is important to point out that donations and purchases cannot always be clearly separated. Generally, what is referred to as Russian donations include 6 MiG-29 fighter jets as well as 30 BRDM-2 reconnaissance vehicles and 30 T-72 tanks, which was agreed upon by then Defence Minister Zoran Djordjevic in 2016 (Tabak 2016). During an official visit of Defense Minister Vulin in Belarus in February 2019, the donation of 4 additional MiG-29 was agreed upon. (Bankovic 2019). However, the Serbian government had to spend 185 million € in total for the overhaul and modernization of Russian donated jets before they can be deployed, for that reason it is questionable that the transaction can fully be considered a donation. (Milacic 2019). Moreover, delivery of the donated tanks and BRDM vehicles proceeded very slowly, with the last items in the contingent only arriving in 2021-2022 (Bankovic 2021).

Purchases of new equipment of Russian origin included multipurpose and attack helicopters (Mi-17V in 2015 and 2018, as well as 4 Mi-35M in 2018), and the Pantsir S-1 surface-to-air missile system. Under a deal agreed in October 2019, Belgrade acquired one battery (6 units) of Pantsir S-1, which was delivered in February-March 2020. Apart from the Pantsir-1, purchase of the S-300 long range missile system (or even its evolved, but significantly more expensive successor, the S-400) has been rumoured by both the Serbian and Russian media in recent years. During the "Slavic Shield" military exercise held in Serbia in October 2019, President Vučić ruled out acquiring the S-400 citing its high cost. Subsequently, at a military event in December 2019, the president declared that Belgrade has no intention to buy the S-300 either. (Harangozó 2020, 6-7).

Even though purchase of S-400 was unrealistic due to its high cost, the decision about the S-300 may have been influenced by American sanctions policy. (Samorukov 2020, 19).



Under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CATSA), enacted in 2017, a nation procuring certain major defence articles from Russia can be subjected to U.S. sanctions. Matthew Palmer, U.S. special envoy on the Balkans, warned about the possibility of US sanctions in November 2019, and that issue featured prominently in the negotiations of Thomas Zarzecki, the senior State Department official responsible for the implementation of CATSA, who arrived for a routine visit to Belgrade in the same month (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019b, Harangozó 2020, 7).

It is important to mention that compared to the number of military exercises with NATO or NATO member states, Serbian military drills with Russia are much less frequent. For example, during the period 2016-2017, four Russo-Serbian military drills were held, the same number as in 2019. This contrasts with the number of NATO related exercises in the relevant period, which is 25 and 13, respectively (European Western Balkans 2017, BCSP 2018, Harangozó 2020, 5).

The first joint military exercise of the armed forces of the two countries was "Srem-2014", held in the same year. Since 2015, Serbia also participates in the annual "Slavic Brotherhood" exercises together with the armed forces of Russia and Belarus. In 2020, however, Serbian participation in that exercise became a source of significant diplomatic controversy. The 2020 edition of "Slavic Brotherhood" was held in Belarus where a political crisis erupted after the seriously flawed August presidential elections and official repression against opposition protesters. EU member states therefore applied significant pressure on Belgrade in order to rescind its participation on that exercise. In the days immediately preceding the drill, the Serbian government proceeded to cancel its appearance, and announced that the country suspends participation in international military exercises for the next six months. Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin explained the decision with the need to protect Serbian neutrality and "very significant Western pressure" but given the fact that no other exercises were planned for the next six months, the step was meant for "face saving" vis a vis Moscow (Harangozó 2020, 7).

RELATIONS WITH CHINA

Serbian ties with the People's Republic of China were until recently limited to economic and political cooperation. Belgrade is an active participant in the Belt and Road Initiative and the 17+1 cooperation framework between China and Central/Southeast Europe. Investment projects with Chinese financing or involvement include infrastructure and energy projects, as well as acquisition of Serbian industrial assets (such as the Smederevo Steel Works or the STB Bor copper mine and smelter) by Chinese enterprises. (CEAS 2019b, 22-26, 36-37, Nouwens and Ferris 2020, 26-27)

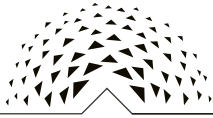
Cooperation in the domain of defence and security dates back only to the last few years. During the 2018 visit of President Vučić to China, the two governments agreed on the procurement of Chinese military drones for the Serbian military, as well as on technology transfer for Serbia's own drone programme (B92 2018, CEAS 2019b, 29). In the end, Belgrade ordered 9 Chinese CH-92A drones with its necessary armament. That delivery, concluded in the summer of 2020, marked the first major Chinese military sales in Europe since the end of the Cold War (Xuanzun 2020, Kastner 2019).

Apart from commercial sales, the People's Republic of China donated military equipment worth \$5.2 million to Belgrade in the period between 2007 and 2018. This compares with the similar American figure of \$9.8 million (Nouwens and Ferris 2020, 16).

News of a potentially much bigger arms deal with China emerged in August 2020 when it was discovered in the annual report of the state-owned Jugoimport SPDR company, responsible for export-import of armaments, that an agreement has been concluded to acquire the FK-3 surface-to-air missile system from Beijing. The FK-3, in its Chinese designation HQ-22, is a medium range missile system developed in the 1990s based on Russia's S-300. (Radic 2020). The news of the deal was not officially denied by the company concerned, and one day later, President Vučić responded by saying that purchase of FK-3 is "only being considered" at the moment. Western reaction was relatively muted: NATO reaffirmed its respect for Serbia's military neutrality, while the American embassy pointed to "significant risks" related to the procurement deal (Zoric 2020, Harangozó 2020, 8). Russian media, however, expressed its disappointment that Belgrade opted for a Chinese missile system, instead of the Russian S-300, whose acquisition was long rumoured by the press in both countries (Kostic 2020). As of April 2021, there is no definitive news on whether the deal was agreed on. If confirmed, Serbia would be the second foreign operator of the FK-3 after Thailand (Bankovic 2020).

Military diplomatic ties also intensified between Belgrade and Beijing in the last few years. Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin met his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe during an official visit in 2018. Serbian defence ministers also delivered addresses several times at International Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, an important annual conference discussing security and defence issues (CEAS 2019b, 30, Nouwens and Ferris 2020, 16). In late 2019, Zhang Youxia, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), met President Aleksandar Vučić in Belgrade to discuss defence cooperation matters (Harangozó 2020, 9).

Despite the intensification of military ties between Belgrade and Beijing, a military exercise involving the two armies has yet to take place. Defence Minister Vulin announced in December 2019, that the first joint exercise of Serbian and Chinese armed forces will take place in 2020. That drill, however, was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2019a, Harangozó 2020, 10).



ASSESSMENT AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

An interesting dualism can be observed in Serbia's neutrality policy: both in how it came about and how it is perceived or operated in practice by policymakers. Its genesis has as much to do with domestic political questions (Tadić-Koštunica rivalry, the 2008 election) and current diplomatic exigencies (the situation of Kosovo) as it had with deep seated social cleavages and collective traumas. Similarly, there is an ambition to formulate a coherent security policy position based on military neutrality (for example, parts of the new national security and defence strategies), and at the same time, neutrality is used as a political device to extract leverage in negotiations with foreign counterparts. Rhetorical invocation of neutrality also serves to explain, or to postpone and circumvent, sensitive political decisions.

Nevertheless, some broader trends can be discerned. Even though there is a desire from part of the Serbian government to "balance" between its "Eastern" and "Western" partners, the cooperation in military and security terms is rather "unbalanced", with cooperation involving NATO being significantly more intensive than cooperation involving Russia or China.

Despite the contrary media narrative, the extent of Serbia's cooperation with NATO is undeniable and the Alliance is here to stay in the country's security policy landscape. This can be explained not only with the country's geographic location (apart from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, all its neighbours are NATO members), the presence of KFOR in Kosovo: the Alliance is also an important source of "military know-how" and partnership with NATO is seen by Belgrade as an important stepping-stone to EU membership (Cuckic 2019, Samorukov 2020, 19-20).

Even if Serbia and Kosovo were to reach a mutually satisfactory solution regarding the disputed status of latter, this would not mean automatic reassessment of Serbian neutrality and NATO membership. Given the widespread unpopularity of NATO and the political-ideological potency of the "victim" narrative connected to the 1999 NATO bombing of the FRY (Ejdus 2014a, 49-50), we do not believe Serbian NATO membership is realistic even in the medium-term.

Similarly, even though it seems Russia and Serbia are "drifting apart", a drastic change in the relations of the two countries is unlikely in the near future. As we mentioned before, until the mutually satisfactory resolution of the status of Kosovo, the Serbian government is interested in keeping the goodwill of Moscow, and vice versa. Moreover, Russia, and in particular, President Vladimir Putin remains popular, especially among the Orthodox-nationalist part of the electorate. Pro-Russian forces continue to have support among members of the armed forces, security services and the police (Samorukov 2019a, 2019b, Harangozó 2020, 10).

Major weapons procurement from Russia in the future might be constrained, however, by the threat of US sanctions. Further intensification of the political conflict between the United States (and, increasingly, the European Union) and Russia will present Belgrade with new challenges.

Defence cooperation between Serbia and China is relatively recent. Belgrade seems to its ties with Beijing as a way to diversify its “non-Western” alliances, given the increasingly fraught Russian-American relationship. The coronavirus pandemic also contributed to China’s growing influence in Serbia, at the times at expense of Russia. Serbia’s links to China suffer from the same vulnerability as his Russian alliance. Intensification of the political conflict between China and the United States (which shows no signs of abating with the new administration in Washington) might lead to new sanctions on Chinese military sales abroad, with a substantial impact on Serbian weapons procurement. American warnings reacting to the news of the potential FK-3 missile deal suggest that the U.S. administration does not view favourably the expansion of Chinese defence industry in Europe (Harangozó 2020, 10-11).

Even more important will be from Belgrade’s perspective the evolution of EU-China ties, particularly if we consider the fact that according to some analysts, as well as former Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn, Brussels in the past overestimated Russian influence in the Balkans but underestimated Beijing’s (European Western Balkans 2019b, Harangozó 2020, 11).

With regards to the long-term sustainability of Belgrade’s neutrality policy we need to separate the above mentioned two facets of Serbian neutrality in practice. Military neutrality, as a security policy position is a legitimate option which is fully consistent with EU membership (a stated goal of the Serbian government), as the example of Sweden, Finland, Austria and Ireland shows. However, at certain point in its EU accession process, Serbia will have to align itself with the Union’s foreign policy positions, including prevailing EU policy on Russia and China as well. Alignment with common foreign policy would mean adherence to the EU arms embargo against China, in force since 1989, which would seriously limit Serbian defence cooperation with that state, even in the absence of new US sanctions against China modelled on the CATSA legislation.

Neutrality can be a legitimate security policy position, if and when backed by a coherent set of national interests, but not when used as a political device or bargaining chip. A future resolution of the Kosovo issue and acceleration of the EU accession process might prompt Serbia to reformulate its neutrality along the above-mentioned lines. When, or indeed if, that will happen is, however, not only up to Belgrade.