

MINILATERAL DEFENCE COOPERATION IN THE BALKANS AND SERBIA'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE

The Balkans increasingly demonstrate that multipolarity does not merely lead to balanced coexistence; rather, it results in fragmented and competitive regional orders where great-power rivalry is navigated through local disputes, partial recognitions, and minilateral security arrangements.

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Since the late 2010s, the legitimacy of American hegemony and the liberal international order has faced growing scrutiny. The setbacks experienced by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, the emergence of China as a significant economic and strategic force, and the diminishing political and economic clout of the European Union have all played a role in this transformation. Simultaneously, the emergence of new conflicts and geopolitical tensions in the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Sahel, and even within the transatlantic relationship between the US and Europe has highlighted the increasing instability of the current order. Friedner Parrat contends that contemporary world politics is characterized by “the end of American hegemony, a possible return to multipolarity,” indicating that the post-Cold War order is experiencing a notable transformation.¹ Nonetheless, even with the US stepping into the role of the world’s policeman following the Second World War, its relative decline indicates that the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world order could lead to new instability and leave unresolved conflicts at risk of escalation. The onset of Donald Trump’s second presidency in the US has already made this trend apparent in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and various other regions. Collectively, these developments prompt a pressing inquiry: where will the next significant conflict zone arise? The Balkans can be

described as a region of negative peace, where the lack of open conflict has primarily been maintained through transatlantic dominance over the area.² However, the process of “Balkanization” has not reached a complete resolution, and the region’s fundamental political and ethnic tensions continue to be unresolved. As the US gradually shifts its strategic focus from the transatlantic space to the Pacific³, the Balkans may find themselves more vulnerable to the influence of other external actors and the resurgence of unresolved conflicts stemming from the 1990s.

The breakup of Yugoslavia led to the emergence of new states and borders; however, it failed to address the underlying issues of sovereignty, territorial legitimacy, and political belonging that persistently influence threat perceptions throughout the Balkans. In the context of the post-Yugoslav order, Serbia has continued to be the primary revisionist actor⁴. From Belgrade’s perspective, the events of the 1990s resulted in Serbia being strategically weakened and politically disadvantaged; its capital faced North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing in 1999, Serb populations were divided by new borders, Montenegro gained independence in 2006, and Kosovo declared its independence in 2008. The feeling of loss and geopolitical sidelining remains a significant

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influence on Serbian strategic thought. It further clarifies Belgrade's ongoing sensitivity to developments in Republika Srpska (RS) of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where RS leader Milorad Dodik's persistent secessionist rhetoric maintains the potential for renewed regional destabilization. In this context, Serbia's foreign policy plays a crucial role in understanding the future direction of the Balkans.

According to Jovanović, Serbia's foreign policy since 2012 has been characterized by a continual fluctuation between pursuing European integration and maintaining strong relations with Russia, reflecting a complex interaction of historical memory, cultural connections, strategic considerations, and domestic political influences.⁵ In light of this context, this paper explores how the rise of unilateral defense cooperation among NATO-aligned Balkan actors, exemplified by the March 2025 Albania-Croatia-Kosovo declaration (Tirana Declaration), alters Serbia's security landscape and influences the potential for escalation in northern Kosovo and RS amid Serbian hedging and Russian involvement. This paper presents three primary arguments. Initially, while the Tirana Declaration should not be interpreted as a formal military alliance against Serbia, it is still possible that it will heighten Serbia's feelings of encirclement and insecurity. Consequently, instead of bringing stability to the region, it could potentially fuel a new arms race in the Balkans and heighten the risk of escalation in already delicate conflict areas, especially in northern Kosovo and RS. Secondly, Serbia is not expected to engage in a distinct geopolitical realignment; rather, it will likely maintain its hedging strategy, navigating between the European Union (EU), Russia, China, and the US while upholding domestic narratives of grievance, insecurity, and historical loss associated with Kosovo⁶. Third, it is probable that the next escalation will not manifest as

overt annexation. This action would elicit significant international opposition, particularly from Kosovo Force (KFOR), EU Operation Althea (EUFOR), and the wider context of EU conditionality. A more likely scenario is gradual destabilization through indirect methods: in northern Kosovo, this may involve localized unrest, institutional obstruction, or security incidents; in RS, it may manifest as constitutional defiance, separatist pressure, and the strengthening of parallel institutions. The objective in both scenarios would be to alter the situation on the ground while avoiding an immediate, significant international reaction.

Historical and Conceptual Foundations

The post-Yugoslav order in the Balkans is grounded in international security frameworks that define what is strategically feasible and what is not. Kosovo's security is closely linked to the NATO-led KFOR, which functions under United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244 and is responsible for maintaining a safe and secure environment as well as ensuring freedom of movement for all communities.⁷ NATO also observes that UNSCR 1244 was adopted on 10 June 1999, with KFOR entering Kosovo shortly thereafter.⁸ The stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia) continues to be upheld by an international framework, where the EU-led EUFOR operates under an executive mandate granted by the UN Security Council.⁹ These frameworks do not "solve" contestation; they facilitate its management. Newman and Visoka contend that NATO's involvement in Kosovo progressed through a "logic of successful security practices," where NATO modifies its actions to align the interests of alliance members, host authorities, and local opposing forces, thereby maintaining legitimacy and operational significance.¹⁰ In this context, KFOR serves as an essential tool for managing escalation, rather than acting as the architect of a definitive political resolution. The growing uncertainty has become increasingly apparent as US officials indicate that Europe cannot rely indefinitely on a consistent American military presence on the continent. In February 2025, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth emphasized that European nations need to increase their defense investments, as it cannot be taken for granted that the US' presence in Europe "will last forever."¹¹ This statement highlights broader concerns regarding the sustainability of the existing security



framework. The internationalized order in Kosovo and Bosnia is stable only under certain conditions: it functions effectively as a crisis management mechanism, yet its deterrent credibility could diminish if the broader strategic foundations of US and NATO commitment become less assured.

Regional Security Complex Logic

The Balkans exhibit characteristics of a regional security complex, where threats are interconnected and closely intertwined across borders. Marleku and Belaj depict a “fragmented security landscape” influenced by historical grievances and external pressures, where non-traditional threats like cybercrime and hybrid warfare are becoming increasingly prominent.¹² Tahirović contends that weak governance, a fragile civil society, and geopolitical disputes render the region particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns.¹³ He notes that Serbia’s positional weight enhances these interdependencies: he describes Serbia as the most influential state economically and politically in the Balkans, with the capacity to sway other regional states toward alternative centres of power.¹⁴ This characteristic of “pivot” is significant as Serbia’s alignment decisions

have implications that resonate throughout Kosovo, Bosnia, and the broader region.

Ontological Insecurity and Kosovo’s Symbolic Centrality

Belloni demonstrates that Serbia’s foreign policy transcends mere utilitarian bargaining. He characterizes ontological security as the practices, routines, and narratives that enable a political community to solidify its understanding of who it is.¹⁵ Kosovo is not merely a matter of territory; it represents a fundamental question of identity. Belloni contends that the conclusion of the Yugoslav wars, marked by the unexpected loss of control over Kosovo, resulted in Serbia experiencing trauma and ontological insecurity.¹⁶ He further observes that the loss of Kosovo is felt as an “injustice” and “shame,” posing a threat to Serbia’s ontological security.¹⁷

This aspect of identity is significant as it alters the reasoning behind escalation; political leaders and the public may tolerate material costs or extended instability to prevent the loss of identity. Belloni contends that following February 2022, the war in Ukraine triggered Serbian recollections of trauma and fostered a Serbia-

centered evaluation of events, drawing parallels to the country's own history, such as the sanctions of the 1990s and NATO's intervention in 1999.¹⁸ In this context, regional defense initiatives that seem to strengthen Kosovo's integration with the West may be perceived in Belgrade not merely as a matter of security policy, but rather as an affront to identity.

Hedging as Serbia's Strategic Tool

Nikolić offers a strategic perspective that enhances Belloni's argument on identity. She contends that Serbia's actions from 2009 to 2023 are most accurately understood as hedging rather than balancing, aligning with Kuik's model; the concurrent pursuit of various policy options along the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum.¹⁹ Hedging integrates return-maximizing strategies like economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning, alongside risk-contingency approaches such as dominance denial and indirect balancing.²⁰ Serbia's foreign and economic policy is comparable to Türkiye's current balancing foreign policy.

She also emphasizes the institutional foundations; the "foreign policy of the four pillars" was officially defined in 2009, accompanied by specific measures to enhance collaboration with various external centers of power.²¹ This clarifies how Serbia can pursue EU integration while maintaining strong connections with Russia, enhancing relationships with China, and engaging in selective regional defense partnerships, all without officially renouncing any direction. Kovačević et al. note that Serbia's National Security Strategy outlines various challenges, risks, and threats. They contend, however, that the global security landscape has shifted both prior to and following the Russia-Ukraine

conflict, necessitating a reevaluation of how threats are interpreted.²² When considered collectively, Serbia's security behavior appears to be both strategically flexible and deeply tied to its identity - a precarious mix in a competitive regional landscape.

The March 2025 Albania-Croatia-Kosovo Declaration and Balkan Minilateralism

The Joint Declaration signed in Tirana on 18 March 2025 emerged as a central and contemporary topic in the discussion of Balkan security, as it unites two NATO allies (Albania and Croatia) with Kosovo, whose security is intertwined with NATO crisis management and whose international recognition faces challenges. The Declaration presents the initiative within the context of NATO/EU strategic documents, highlighting ambitions derived from the NATO Strategic Concept and the EU Strategic Compass.²³ The Declaration is organized as a series of commitments to cooperation, capability development, training, counter-hybrid resilience, and support for Euro-Atlantic integration, rather than as a mutual defense pledge. Furthermore, it clearly indicates that it "does not create any new international or intergovernmental legal obligations between States," and does not impact existing obligations.²⁴ These convey political intent and coordination instead of treaty-based military obligations. Even in the absence of treaty force, the Declaration has the potential to transform the strategic landscape and highlights the necessity for alternative regional security alliances. It illustrates how power disparities may drive regional actors to prioritize their own security over reliance on current security agreements and institutions. This declaration is significant as it plays a role in the normalization of Kosovo as a defense actor. The commitment is made to enhance cooperation and coordination for Kosovo's integration into regional security initiatives, while also supporting Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic perspective, with a clear reference to Kosovo's status in NATO's Partnership for Peace.

This transition symbolically moves Kosovo from an "internationally protected space" to a "regional security participant," a change that holds significant importance within Belgrade's ontological security framework. Furthermore, it establishes a framework for interoperability and coordination within the defense

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industry. The commitment is made to joint education and training opportunities, as well as to enhancing bilateral and trilateral exercises in accordance with NATO and EU training policies.²⁵ Even modest outputs can be significant, as institutionalization indicates continuity, which often enhances the dynamics of the security dilemma. Third, the Declaration emphasizes hybrid threats. It clearly addresses cyber threats, disinformation campaigns, and foreign malign influence, while also committing to the sharing of information and intelligence for enhanced situational awareness. This aligns with regional threat assessments: Tahirović highlights the susceptibility to disinformation²⁶, while Vulović cautions against hybrid threats and the spread of disinformation through platforms like *Sputnik News*²⁷.

Through the establishment of security cooperation among NATO-aligned entities that do not include Serbia, Balkan minilateralism has the potential to amplify Belgrade's sense of existential threat and strategic encirclement. This could drive Serbia away from EU-centered moderation and towards a more revisionist and independent stance, where external balancing, nationalist rhetoric, and coercive pressure on contested areas become increasingly appealing. The outcome may not lead to outright war, but rather to a regional atmosphere rife with conflict, characterized by heightened mistrust, intensified security dilemmas, and an increased chance of destabilizing crises.

Serbia's Strategic Response: Hedging, Modernization, and Counter-Alignment

If the Tirana Declaration is interpreted as a signal and a means of institutionalization, Serbia's response can be best understood as a form of counter-signalling within a hedging strategy. Serbia has not adopted a strategy of overt territorial conquest; instead, it has focused on (i) diversifying its defense procurement and modernizing capabilities, (ii) strengthening bilateral defense cooperation with chosen partners, and (iii) maintaining strategic ambiguity between the EU and Russia.

Defence Procurement and the Political Economy of Deterrence

Serbia's procurement decisions exemplify the concept of hedging. In August 2024, Serbia finalized an

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agreement with France's Dassault Aviation to acquire 12 Rafale fighter jets for 2.7 billion euros.²⁸ The political significance goes beyond mere capability; it indicates a readiness to strengthen connections with a key EU nation while simultaneously pushing back against EU pressures for alignment against Russia, aligning more with a portfolio strategy than with exclusive alignment. In March 2026, it was reported by Reuters that Serbia had acknowledged the purchase of Chinese CM-400AKG missiles and the adaptation of Russian MiG-29 aircraft to carry them.²⁹ This aligns with hedging logic; Serbia enhances its deterrent capability while indicating an ongoing willingness to engage with Chinese military technology. Tahirović notes that China is an important partner for Serbia, with investment connections intensifying post-2016, which sheds light on this defence-economic hybridity.³⁰ Kovačević et al. elucidate the reasons behind the political significance of such procurement. Should the interpretation of threats change following the Ukraine war, political leaders will have motivations to showcase their readiness and strategic adjustments.³¹ Procurement serves as a clear manifestation of "status defence," aligning with Belloni's assertion that Serbia's anxieties regarding its liminal status contribute to a sense of mistrust and a reluctance to fully align.³²

The Serbia-Hungary Framework as Counter-Minilateralism

Serbia's most prominent diplomatic-military reaction to the Tirana Declaration was the enhancement of defense collaboration with Hungary. On April 1, 2025, Serbia and Hungary formalized an agreement to enhance strategic defense cooperation, outlining 79 joint activities scheduled for 2025.³³ The prominent signing acted as a counter-signal; while Tirana formalized NATO-aligned cooperation concerning Serbia, Belgrade advanced a defense planning network with a NATO/EU member that maintains a politically close relationship with Serbia.

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The overarching analytical observation is structural; the Balkans are undergoing intersecting minilateralism integrated within NATO/EU mission frameworks. Networked competition can heighten insecurity even in the absence of alliances, as these arrangements are viewed as anticipatory alignments and signals of diminishing strategic choices.

Hedging and Ontological Insecurity as Escalation Mechanisms

Hedging can be accomplished by steering clear of binary alignment, yet it can also provide coercive leverage beneath the threshold of war. Belloni contends that Serbia's concerns regarding recognition and acceptance are foundational to its mistrust of the EU; the demands for alignment are viewed through the lens of Serbia's ambiguous status and perceived inequitable treatment.³⁴ When NATO-aligned neighbours actively promote Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration through minilateralism, Serbia might view this not just as regional defence cooperation but as an attempt to solidify a post-1999 order that threatens Serbian identity narratives. Jovanović's account offers a framework for understanding domestic political dynamics. He observes that the politics of the Aleksandar Vučić era in Serbia merge a practical pro-European agenda with a robust and assertive national identity,³⁵ and that Serbia's leadership aims to optimize advantages from both the EU and Russia while maintaining sovereignty.³⁶ This approach fosters a politics of "managed crisis," which means intermittently invoking sovereignty narratives, particularly concerning Kosovo, to maintain domestic legitimacy, while tactically steering clear of commitments that might limit external options.

Escalation Dynamics in Northern Kosovo and Republika Srpska

From a realistic standpoint, it is understandable that Serbia will strive to enhance its influence over Northern Kosovo and RS, where Serbians constitute the majority. A comprehensive risk assessment should distinguish between capability, constraint, and incentive. While annexation scenarios are not out of the question given the current global political landscape, they face significant structural limitations. Grey-zone tactics and the erosion of constitutional norms are often less restricted and more politically advantageous.

Northern Kosovo: Why Grey-Zone Tactics Dominate Annexation

Kosovo continues to be a key element in NATO's crisis management efforts. Newman and Visoka's "logic of successful security practices" indicates that NATO adjusts and refines its engagement in Kosovo to maintain legitimacy and effectiveness in a challenging environment.³⁷ KFOR's role is fundamentally to prevent escalation and ensure freedom of movement, rather than to enforce a final settlement. The limitation on annexation is evident in KFOR's ability to reinforce. NATO has announced that following the violence in 2023 in the village of Banjska, it has bolstered KFOR with an additional 1,000 troops, increasing the mission's total to "well over 4,500" personnel.³⁸ According to *Reuters*' report, the unrest in May 2023 prompted NATO to deploy an additional 700 troops and place another battalion on high alert.³⁹ The deployment patterns increase the expense associated with overt Serbian military action. Nevertheless, constraints do not remove escalation; they alter its nature. The Banjska case exemplifies violence that remains beneath the threshold. In September 2023, gunmen from Serbia launched an attack on Kosovo police and sought refuge in a monastery, resulting in deadly clashes and the acquisition of heavy weaponry.⁴⁰ In September 2024, Kosovo announced the indictment of 45 suspects on terrorism charges connected to the attack.

Although KFOR may deter conventional invasions, these incidents demonstrate that organized armed actions can take place in a KFOR-supported context and still produce significant political consequences. The explosion of the Ibar-Lepenac canal serves as a second illustration of coercion centered on infrastructure.

According to *Reuters*, a blast has caused damage to a canal that supplies water to Kosovo's primary power plants, impacting both electricity generation and drinking water. Kosovo has characterized the incident as a terrorist act and has attributed blame to Serbia, which has denied any involvement. Additionally, Kosovo has reported arrests related to the incident.⁴¹

This incident highlights the extent to which critical infrastructure can serve as a coercive target, capable of undermining governance and public trust, all while staying beneath the threshold of traditional interstate conflict. The cases are directly linked to the Tirana Declaration's focus on addressing hybrid threats and harmful influence.⁴² Their observations align with Tahirović's caution that inadequate governance and societal vulnerability facilitate disinformation and destabilization.

Republika Srpska: Constitutional Erosion and the Secessionist Pathway

In contrast to Kosovo's security challenges, Bosnia's crisis revolves more around issues of sovereignty and constitutional order than border skirmishes. Vulović contends that Serbia and RS utilize their connections

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with Russia to further their political objectives, specifically in relation to Kosovo policy for Serbia and separatist aspirations for RS, positioning them as alignment outliers within the WB6.⁴³ This connection is significant as it uncovers a common strategic framework; both Kosovo and Bosnia serve as venues where disputed sovereignty can be exploited without the need for formal conflict, and where support from Russia can enhance local tensions. In February 2025, RS enacted legislation that prohibits Bosnia's national police and judiciary from operating within its territory, cautioning that this action could lead to a constitutional crisis.⁴⁴ Further separatist actions were later reported, including efforts to establish an RS border police force, which have been characterized as exacerbating the most significant constitutional crisis since the conclusion of the war.⁴⁵



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The international reactions highlight the gravity of the situation. EUFOR has announced that reserve forces will be arriving in Bosnia by land and air in March 2025, thereby enhancing its operational capacity on the ground.⁴⁶ According to reports, European peacekeeping forces have deployed reserves in response to the ongoing standoff, while Dodik indicated his intention to request Russia to veto the extension of EUFOR.⁴⁷ This exemplifies a classic spoiler dynamic in which Moscow can enhance RS brinkmanship by increasing uncertainty regarding the reliability of international insurance.

The correction of the annexation is crucial in this context. The formal annexation of RS by Serbia would clearly alter the 1995 Dayton Agreement that ended the Bosnian War, making it a less likely scenario in the near future. The more likely threat is the erosion of constitutional integrity and parallel developments, which can lead to numerous effects similar to annexation such as diminished central authority, territorial fragmentation, and coercive political practices without any official alteration of borders.

Conclusion

The broader significance of the current developments discussed extends beyond mere bilateral or trilateral effects; it illustrates a wider pattern of security polarization in the Balkans within an increasingly multipolar international order. The most probable outcome is not a direct interstate conflict, but rather the strengthening of competing security frameworks throughout the region. On one side, actors aligned with NATO and the EU, including Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo, are expected to enhance their minilateral defense coordination, supported by principles of resilience, interoperability, and safeguarding against hybrid threats. Conversely, Serbia is expected to react by increasing its hedging

strategies, engaging in selective counter-alignment, modernizing its military, and maintaining its political dependence on Russia, with some reliance on China as well. This dynamic may not instantly disrupt the regional order, but it would intensify mistrust, solidify geopolitical blocs, and increase the likelihood of crises in northern Kosovo and Bosnia. Serbia's enduring endeavor to maintain strategic independence between the East and the West indicates that its reaction to exclusionary regional security frameworks is improbable to be accepted; instead, it is more likely to manifest as a more independent and potentially more revisionist stance.

This indicates that, at the regional level, we may face a future characterized by managed instability instead of resolution. The Balkans would continue to exist formally below the threshold of war, yet would be increasingly marked by competing alignments, dynamics of a symbolic arms race, constitutional obstructions, and ongoing gray-zone confrontations. This holds particular significance in a region characterized by institutional fragility and vulnerability to external disinformation and political manipulation, as highlighted by Tahirović in his examination of weak governance, geopolitical disputes, and susceptibility to malign influence.⁴⁸

The implications at the global level are even more illuminating. The Balkans increasingly demonstrate that multipolarity does not merely lead to balanced coexistence; rather, it results in fragmented and competitive regional orders where great-power rivalry is navigated through local disputes, partial recognitions, and minilateral security arrangements. In this context, sovereignty takes on multiple layers, is subject to contestation, and is influenced by external management rather than being completely resolved. Kosovo serves as a significant case study: as Newman and Visoka illustrate, it continues to be a center of wider geopolitical and normative tensions, where NATO's ongoing involvement maintains deterrence yet fails to completely address the fundamental conflict.⁴⁹

Ultimately, the main takeaway is that the Balkans have evolved beyond being just a post-conflict periphery of Europe. The region increasingly serves as a microcosm of the emerging international order; an order characterized by incomplete integration, resurgent revisionist narratives, the influence of external spoilers, and the rise of flexible minilateral coalitions. The future

of Balkan security will hinge not only on local actors but also on the ability of the broader international order to offer credible mechanisms for de-escalation, legitimacy, and political settlement amid an era of intensifying multipolar competition.

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