

NATO-Serbia Relations: Still Defining the *Modus Vivendi*

POLICY PAPER

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Serbia's relations with the Alliance has been for decades considered to be one of the most delicate within the Transatlantic region. Despite numerous signs of positive progress, these relations will continue to be plagued by the complex weight of history. However, the best approach to this challenge is a combination of pragmatic engagement and realistic ambition, which has been the practice in recent years.

The necessity of nurturing rational defence relations

The perception and image of the Alliance among the public in Serbia is strongly shaped by the experience with the NATO's intervention during the Kosovo conflict in 1998-99 and its involvement in Bosnia earlier during the civil war in the Republic of Yugoslavia. The public image is also strongly shaped by the fact that NATO maintains its international "Kosovo Force" (KFOR) military presence on Kosovo territory – viewed by some of the Serbian nationalists as the „cultural birthplace of the Serbian nation“ and that most of the NATO members recognized Kosovo independence. The increased tension between the West and the East over Russia's engagement in Eastern Europe - Ukraine in particular – combined with growing Russian disinformation campaign and increased activities of „influence agents“ have significantly shaped the public perception of the Alliance amongst Serbia's population since 2014. Despite the fact that the topic of NATO – Serbia relations are still somewhat taboo in public discourse, the current Serbian Government prefers to maintain more pragmatic, beneficial cooperation.

Even prior to the establishment of a formal partnership, Serbia proved willing to cooperate with the Alliance when it embarked on limited security and defence consultations with NATO on the military reform process and supported the participation of military and civilian officers in several NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) professional courses. Responding to the altered security landscape in Kosovo, in the summer of 2005 Serbia signed a transit agreement with the Alliance allowing the trespass of Allied forces serving in KFOR mission through Serbian territory and institutionalised a formal line of communication via establishment of the NATO Military Liaison Office in Belgrade. Building upon the positive momentum in relations and responding to mostly European calls for further formalization of these relations, Serbia joined Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina in signing the *Partnership for*

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Peace Framework Document in late 2006, laying the foundation for confidence-building measures via common training, exercises, disaster relief, scientific cooperation and inter-institutional reforms. Despite the continuous resistance from Belgrade to enhance the public profile of cooperation, both sides seem to have reached a decade-long consensus on the meaningfulness of cooperation in Serbia's defence and security sector reform process, which constitute the core element of cooperation to date. The Serbia-NATO Defence Reform Group is the most tangible symbol of such a cooperative engagement. The Group, established 2006, seeks to provide guidance and support to the Serbian defence authorities toward the reform of its armed forces in the name of modernization, fiscal-rationalization, transparency-enhancement and the strengthening of the democratic (civilian) oversight.

In 2009, just a decade after the NATO intervention in Kosovo, Serbia reached its first Individual Partnership Programme (IPP) with the Alliance, stipulating the long-term priorities for its cooperation with NATO and establishing Serbia's permanent mission to NATO. With Croatia and Albania formally joining the Alliance and Montenegro reaching its door-step, Serbia finalized the *Individual Partnership Action Plan* (IPAP) in 2015, which constituted the highest level of cooperation between NATO and any country without intended full-fledged membership. The IPAP extends the framework of cooperation between Serbia and NATO to an extensive array of areas, including political and security cooperation, public diplomacy, crisis management, emergency planning and protection of classified information. Despite lasting political obstacles preventing the political elevation of cooperation, both NATO and Serbia created a sizeable space for mutually beneficial pragmatic engagement that has produced a positive record of accomplishment with relevant added-value.

For instance, specific units of the Serbian armed forces have been granted certificates of interoperability with NATO's capabilities and are thus eligible for potential mutual deployment in international crisis management operations throughout the wider-region. NATO has supported several PfP Trust Fund projects that were aimed at securing the safe disarmament of landmines and unused ammunition. Within the framework of NATO - Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme, Serbia participated in projects to reduce the seismic risk hazard, enhance the regional cooperation mechanism and counter the threat of terrorism.

Facing the inability to break the political gridlock

Over the course of previous years, the diplomatic relations between Serbia and the Alliance have been challenged simultaneously on two fronts. First, with respect to geopolitics, Serbia finds itself between West and East political forces as they play out across the continent. Serbia has laid out a course of somewhat unconventional foreign policy strategy aimed to expand relations with both Russia and the West – mainly the EU. This dichotomy is based on the country's historical and cultural proximity to Russia and at the same time on its legitimate interest in the process of modernization and regional integration. In fact, the largest volume of investment, trade and development assistance in Serbia comes from the EU and the West.

Secondly, Serbia's bilateral relations with Kosovo are a significant obstacle in its relations with the West. Despite Kosovo's declaration of independence, recognized by 111 UN member states (despite lacking recognition of 5 EU members including Slovakia), Serbia's political leadership have vowed never to recognise a sovereign and independent Kosovo irrespective of the diplomatic context. This piece of political reality had been exercised in 2008, when Serbia's involvement in PfP was paused (for a year) as the direct reaction to Kosovo's declaration of independence and to the supportive position of most of the NATO members toward the notion of Kosovar independence. In general, EU and NATO integration processes are largely considered to be overlapping. With the perceived unfeasibility of Serbia's effective inclusion into the NATO enlargement process, the focus of institutional westernization in Serbia has shifted to EU enlargement – where "soft security" reform (i.e. enhancing the rule of law and fighting corruption) have been taking place.

On potential EU membership, the political climate in Belgrade is considerably warmer. Despite that fact that the EU itself is going through a politically challenging period, Serbia's long-term political ambitions of membership are encouraging for the Alliance itself – as Serbia's potential accession to the Union would also include its participation in the EU's *Common Security and Defence Policy* agenda –

where most NATO policies share a significant level of thematic correlation. Arguably, the greatest breakthrough in Serbian diplomacy (i.e. the process of continuous opening to dialogue with Kosovo) has been related to its quest for EU membership. Both the Dačić's and Vučić's governments made significant progress in political dialogue with Kosovo under the EU's direction. Moreover, under the current government of Aleksandar Vučić, the Serbian leadership respects NATO ambition to provide security guarantees for the Serb-dominated entities in Kosovo. Despite the constructive nature of cooperation with the Alliance, there are clear limits in the cadence of mutual engagement given predominantly by Serbia's complicated geopolitical predisposition and strategic interests. For one, Russia will, in the long run, remain an important partner to Serbia and while the country may lean towards the West in societal developments, economic modernization and diplomatic priority, it will not formally join the Alliance – irrespective of the level of cooperation. Still, even the recent boost in Vladimir Putin's geopolitical standing, however relevant for the entire continent, will not draw inordinately more interest from Serbia both because of the pragmatic benefits of cooperation with the Alliance and, more so, because of the crucial role of Western investment and financial aid that drives the modernisation of the country.

The vaguely codified “military neutrality” of Serbia is the symbolic guarantor of Serbia's balanced approach towards its interests both in the *West* and in the *East* – as despite the widening scope of cooperation with the Alliance, Serbia has been increasing the public profile of its military relations with the Kremlin as well. Ever since Aleksandar Vučić (who until August 2013 was also heading the MoD) became the leading political persona driving the nation's defence and security policy, Serbia has been engaged in balancing the increasingly visible cooperation with the Alliance with the public profile of political and military relations with the Kremlin. Embarking on cooperative arms procurement, becoming an observer at the Russia-led *Collective Security Treaty Organisation* (CSTO) and the establishment of a humanitarian centre for common rapid disaster response missions in Serbia's southern city of Niš, represent the most notable symbols of a rise in the bilateral defence relations. However, even with the past progress in cooperation with Russia, the hitherto-achieved level of Serbia's cooperation with the Alliance remains significantly higher than the one established with Moscow. Serbia is still conducting more military exercises with NATO member countries, or even participates in NATO military exercises, than it conducts with Russia. There is a new dynamism to the Serbia – Russia military relations though. The recently announced donations of older (yet still fully functioning and capable) military hardware including MiG-29 jet fighters from Russia to Serbia under favourable conditions are meant to underline the good relations between the two countries.

While the enthusiasm for political dialogue with NATO has been volatile in Belgrade, there is an apparent shift in how the two partners perceive each other. With the current Serbian government, NATO has moved from being an enemy to being a credible partner – though with clearly proclaimed limits on the extent of cooperation. Within this line of progress, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg described Serbia as “an exporter of stability” in the Western Balkans (November 2015). The ultimate obstacle in breaking the gridlock in Serbia's relations with the Alliance rests in continuous public scepticism vis-à-vis Serbia's involvement in NATO activities. More than a decade later, the mutual relations are still burdened by the living memory of NATO's air strikes against Serbia, even after NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg expressed “*regret over the loss of innocent lives*” – which is to date the greatest conciliatory admission of NATO's responsibility for the unintended consequences of its military intervention.

Kosovo is still the important factor influencing Serbia – NATO relations. Current Serbian Government perceives KFOR as protector of Serbian ethnic minority in Kosovo. Over years they have developed pragmatic cooperation between Serbian Armed Forces and KFOR that include crisis management early warning mechanisms and joint patrolling along the “administrative boundary line” aimed at curbing smuggling, trafficking and illegal migration. All these activities improve the image of NATO in Serbia and even the highest political officials in Belgrade openly praise NATO for its current role as the KFOR in Kosovo. These relations could get new – quite unexpected – twist. On March 7, 2017 the Kosovo President Hashim Thaci proposed to the Kosovo Assembly transformation of the current Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) into regular armed forces, strengthening their mandate as well as raising their numbers. This step was met with strong disagreement from Belgrade and, somewhat unexpectedly, from the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (March 8, 2017), who strongly opposed the notion of a unilateral formation of the Kosovo Armed Forces without proper consultations with Serbia within the Belgrade – Priština format, warning of potential escalation in tensions between the two countries.

Only a relatively limited share of Serbian society (circa 10%) has a favourable stance towards a potential full-fledged NATO membership, while scepticism is predominant both in size (over 70%) and cross-cutting societal scope, i.e. shared across age groups, regions and the political left and right. Across the Serbian political spectrum, there are numerous reasons for the resentment vis-à-vis the Alliance. The Serbian extreme right and far left tend to associate NATO with endemic anti-Slavic bias, deliberate “war crimes” against Serbs and geopolitical quest for the subordination of smaller nations. Towards the centre of the Serbian society, more moderate and less emotional reservations prevail – based on NATO’s interventionist reputation, the potential loss of Serbian troops for expeditionary operations and siding against Russia when a confrontation arises. This predominantly negative image of the Alliance within the Serbian society has constituted the source of a very limited interest in investing any political capital into the advocacy of strengthening the Serbia – NATO cooperation or even considering potential NATO membership, which only reinforces the gridlock in public trust-building between the Alliance and the Serbian society. With this backdrop, Serbian political leadership has been reluctant to advocate a political path of extensive cooperation, which would lead to a political dead-end.

Increasing the level of relations, but no romance in sight.

Particularly since 2013 there has been an increase in high level and political meetings between NATO and Serbia that was uncommon before. This process has been quite pragmatic, however, with increased technical assistance going hand in hand with increased political contacts. In 2013 Serbia’s special Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Centre in Kruševac was certified as the NATO Partnership Training and Education Centre and thus became available for NATO member countries as well as partners to train there. Furthermore, NATO launched a trust fund to liquidate over 2.000 tons of surplus ammunition and explosives. The following year in September the NATO Summit in Wales was attended by the Minister of Defence of Serbia Bratislav Gašić who was the first Serbian high representative to attend the NATO Summit. Serbia’s progress in terms of defence cooperation and normalisation of relations with Kosovo was commended in the official outcomes of the Summit.

In March 2015 Ministers of defence and foreign affairs of Serbia Gašić and Dačić visited the NATO HQ in Brussels. Their visit followed the adoption of Serbia’s first IPAP in January 2015. In July 2015, Serbian Parliament adopted PfP SOFA – a technical agreement that facilitates the cooperation and participation of armed forces in exercises, including status of foreign forces while present on the territory of another state. This move sparked, quite unexpectedly, stark protests of Serbian nationalists, that erupted into a brief period of violent riots. Then in November 2015, the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Serbia, the first NATO Secretary General to visit Serbia. During this historic visit the Secretary General expressed sympathies to civilian victims of the NATO air-campaign during the Kosovo conflict in 1999. At the same time, he announced full relaxation of the KFOR air safety zone, that was in place over Kosovo since 1999. Serbia was also represented at the Warsaw summit in July 2016, where the Allies commended the increased level of cooperation between Serbia and NATO as well as progress in normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Finally, in November 2016 Prime Minister Vučić visited the NATO HQ in Brussels and became the first Serbian Prime Minister to do so.

It is also worth mentioning that in the January 2013 – December 2016 period the Slovak Embassy in Belgrade was fulfilling its two mandates as the NATO Contact Point Embassy for Serbia and was actively supporting high level meetings as well as the discussion about Serbia – NATO relations at the public level.

Summary

Serbia – NATO relations will remain nuanced with both sides treading lightly in order to avoid provoking anti-NATO propaganda, sentiment that remains quite strong in Serbia and that could stir unnecessary public controversy. On the other hand, the pragmatic and practical cooperation will surely continue at technical and military levels with careful steps in the political forum.

A lot will depend on Serbia's progress with EU integration, which is one of the declared priorities of the current government, as many are associating the European integration with the Euro-Atlantic integration – after the model of the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the Alliance first and only then the EU. This might not be the case for Serbia though.

The second important factor influencing relations with NATO will be Serbia's relations with Russia in the broader context of Russia – Western relations.

The third factor will be the development of Belgrade – Priština talks on normalisation of relations and the "Kosovo issue" in general.

Lastly, at the political level NATO is not a topic of the political discourse in Serbia and with the Presidential elections approaching (April 2, 2017) this will remain the case. The potential accession of Serbia to NATO is a non-starter. This, however, does not mean that there is no more room for development of pragmatic relations between Serbia and the Alliance.

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