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The Post-2014 Arms Race in the Western Balkans: Geopolitical Implications, External Influences, and the Security Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the reemergence of competitive militarization in the Western Balkans after 2014, analyzing its evolution in the absence of a regional security framework. Drawing on neorealist theory and the concept of the security dilemma, the research investigates how internal insecurities and great-power rivalries have contributed to a regional arms race. The central research question is: How has the post-2014 arms race in the Western Balkans evolved, and what risks does it pose for future conflict? The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative data on defense spending and arms acquisitions with qualitative analysis of national defense strategies and external actor involvement. Case studies of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro highlight divergent security strategies and the absence of effective regional coordination. The findings reveal that military modernization across the region has intensified due to external influence (NATO, Russia, China), perceived threats, and a lack of institutional mechanisms for arms control. This dynamic has led to heightened mistrust and strategic miscalculations, increasing the risk of escalation during future crises. The thesis concludes with policy recommendations aimed at reducing insecurity, including confidence-building measures, renewed arms control frameworks, and a more coordinated international approach. The research contributes to academic debates on post-conflict security, neorealism, and regional militarization.

Keywords: Western Balkans, arms race, security dilemma, neorealism, military modernization, geopolitical competition

Table of Contents

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFBiH	Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CFE	Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
EDT	Emerging and Disruptive Technologies
ERIP	European Recapitalization Incentive Program
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force (Operation Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina)
EXPLODE+	Ammunition stockpile reduction initiative (UNDP/OSCE project)
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
FPV	First-Person View (drone perspective)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HMMWV	High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle
HQ	Headquarters
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IFOR	Implementation Force (NATO peacekeeping mission in Bosnia)
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
JNA	Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija*)
JVuO	Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland (*Četnik* forces in WWII)
KFOR	Kosovo Force (NATO peacekeeping mission in Kosovo)
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
KSF	Kosovo Security Force
MDAP	Mutual Defense Assistance Program

MIC	Military-Industrial Complex
MoD	Ministry of Defense
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NOVJ	People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia (*Narodnooslobodilačka Vojska Jugoslavije*)
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
OHR	Office of the High Representative (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation (EU defense initiative)
RAP	Readiness Action Plan
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
RS	*Republika Srpska* (Bosnian Serb entity)
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SFOR	Stabilization Force (NATO peacekeeping mission in Bosnia)
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UDBA	State Security Administration (Yugoslav secret police)
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNMilEx	United Nations Military Expenditure Reports
USA	United States of America
US	United States (U.S.)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
VJTF	Very High Readiness Joint Task Force
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

INTRODUCTION

Background & Context

In October 2021, The Economist published a headline warning of "A Balkans arms race" as Serbia launched a significant arms acquisition campaign, with a defense budget increase to $1.4 billion[1]. Earlier that year, Croatia's purchase of multiple *Rafale* fighter jets for nearly €1 billion was described by media as part of a "mini arms race" with Serbia[2]. These developments signal a reestablished militarization in the Western Balkans, a region only two decades beyond war. Since 2014, countries in this region have steadily increased defense spending and acquired advanced weaponry, raising concerns about a renewed arms race and its implications for regional stability. The absence of any overarching regional security framework to manage these tensions has further amplified fears that competitive armaments could spiral into a classic security dilemma.

The Western Balkans is witnessing a post-2014 increase in military procurement and defense budgets, often framed as an emerging arms race. Serbia, for example, has become one of the world's top 40 arms importers, increasing its arms purchases by 743% in recent years[3]. Its arsenal expansion - including acquisitions of Russian air defense systems, Chinese drones, and plans to purchase French fighter jets - has outpaced that of its neighbors. Determined to keep pace, NATO member Croatia nearly doubled its defense spending since 2017, largely due to big-ticket procurements like the Rafale fighters. Other states are following, even Albania and *Kosovo, which until recently invested little in armaments, have launched major military modernization programs amid rising regional tensions and the spillover of the Ukraine war.

This arms build-up is unfolding in a fragile security environment. Unresolved political disputes (such as Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo and Bosnia's internal ethnic divisions) and the lack of any binding regional arms control arrangement lay the foundation for mutual suspicion. The only arms control regime in the region - the 1996 Dayton Agreement's Article IV - was designed to prevent a new

[1] The Economist, "Serbia Is on a Shopping Spree for Weapons," October 30, 2021, https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/10/30/serbia-is-on-a-shopping-spree-for-weapons (accessed March 5, 2025).
[2] *Vuk Vuksanovic and Marija Ignjatijevic*, "What's Behind the Arms Buildup in the Balkans," War on the Rocks, December 28, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/whats-behind-the-arms-buildup-in-the-balkans/ (accessed March 5, 2025).
[3] Xhelal Neziri, "Arms Race in the Balkans: Serbia Leads with Weapons from China, Russia and Belarus," The Geopost, February 17, 2024, https://thegeopost.com/en/analysis/arms-race-in-the-balkans-serbia/ (accessed March 5, 2025).

arms race after the Yugoslav wars. However, international oversight of that regime ended in 2014. In the years since, heated rhetoric has accompanied new weapons purchases, eroded inter-state trust and undermined the spirit of cooperation. In short, the Western Balkans today face a classic security dilemma: one state's attempt to increase its security by arming can unintentionally threaten others, prompting them to respond in kind and leaving all sides less secure.

Literature Gap

A substantial body of literature examines post–Cold War Western Balkan security, focusing on peacebuilding, NATO/EU integration, and the legacy of the 1990s conflicts. Scholars have also considered ethnic security dilemmas within multi-ethnic states and the challenges of state-building in the region. However, few studies have systematically analyzed the renewed militarization of the Western Balkans since 2014, particularly given the lack of regional security architecture. Policy analysts and media have warned of a "specter of an arms race" in the Balkans, but its deeper causes and consequences remain under-examined in academic research. This thesis addresses that gap with a theory-guided analysis of how and why a new arms race dynamic has emerged in the Western Balkans and what it portends for regional stability.

Research Question

This thesis asks: How has the post-2014 arms race in the Western Balkans evolved in the absence of a regional security framework, and what risks does this pose for future conflict? The thesis systematically analyzes the patterns of competitive armament in the region over the past decade and evaluates whether current trends could precipitate renewed conflict. To answer this question, the study pursues four objectives: (1) to examine the evolution of military modernization and arms acquisitions in the region since 2014; (2) to evaluate the influence of external actors on regional defense strategies and armaments; (3) to assess the security risks and geopolitical consequences of an unregulated arms buildup; and (4) to explore policy options that could reduce tensions and enhance stability. In doing so, the research contributes to both scholarly understanding and policy discussions on conflict prevention.

Relevance and Significance

Academically, the Western Balkans presents a case to test neorealist ideas about how small states behave without a hegemonic security guarantor. This study further demonstrates how great-

power competition (involving NATO, Russia, and China) shapes local security dynamics and can compound or mitigate a regional security dilemma.

Practically, the study is highly relevant for policymakers and security practitioners concerned with European stability. A clearer grasp of the drivers behind Balkan militarization can inform NATO and EU strategies to reassure states and prevent competitive armament and can support regional initiatives to implement confidence-building measures or new arms control agreements. By identifying the factors fueling the arms race, this research provides insights that could help mitigate the risk of conflict and promote a more cooperative security environment in the Western Balkans.

Theoretical Framework

The neorealist position rests on the conviction that in an anarchic international system - one lacking a central authority - states must rely on self-help; actions one state takes to increase its security (such as military buildups or alliances) can unintentionally threaten others, prompting them to respond in kind. This dynamic often leads to a security dilemma, where measures intended to enhance security end up fueling mutual suspicion and an arms buildup spiral.

Using this theoretical lens, the thesis examines whether the ongoing arms buildup is driven primarily by security fears and power-balancing (as neorealism suggests) or by other forces such as domestic political agendas or external patronage. The security dilemma framework helps explain how even ostensibly defensive moves (e.g. modernizing outdated military hardware) may be perceived as threatening in a low-trust environment, thereby provoking neighboring states to arm in response.

External Influences

NATO's expansion has been a double-edged sword: it provides security to member states like Croatia and Montenegro but heightens Serbia's sense of exclusion. Russia, Serbia's historic ally, has countered NATO's presence by supplying Belgrade with weapons and political support. China has also become a significant player by selling Serbia drones and missiles, marking Beijing's first military foothold in Europe.

The European Union and Turkey further shape the region's security environment. The EU exerts influence via political engagement and peacekeeping missions (such as EUFOR in Bosnia), while Turkey has provided military training and equipment in countries like Bosnia and *Kosovo. Overall, this arms race is intertwined with broader geopolitics. Spillover effects from events such as Russia's

2022 invasion of Ukraine - along with the push-and-pull of NATO, Russian, and Chinese involvement - feed into local threat perceptions and defense choices.

Argument and Approach

This thesis argues that an unregulated arms race has re-emerged in the Western Balkans, driven by internal insecurities and external rivalries. In the absence of a strong regional security framework, states have adopted classic self-help strategies - independently strengthening military capabilities to counterbalance perceived threats from neighbors or separatist movements. Great-power involvement, through arms supplies and security patronage, has further turned the Balkans into a proxy arena for competition. These dynamics heighten the risk of miscalculation: while no government openly seeks war, growing arsenals and hardened threat perceptions mean a future crisis (a border incident or a collapse of Serbia–Kosovo negotiations) could swiftly escalate into conflict.

The study employs a mixed-method approach. Quantitatively, it tracks defense expenditures and arms acquisitions from 2014 onward using data from sources such as SIPRI and regional defense reports. Qualitatively, it analyzes national security strategies, defense white papers, and leaders' statements in each country, supplemented by expert commentary. By combining numerical data with qualitative insights, the research links measurable trends in militarization to the perceptions and political motives driving them, providing a nuanced understanding of both how and why the arms race is unfolding.

Thesis Structure

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical and historical foundation. It introduces the key theories and reviews the historical background of regional militarization – from the Yugoslav arms industry and post-war disarmament efforts to key events leading up to the current arms buildup. Chapter 2 examines the defense postures of individual Western Balkan states. It discusses Serbia's recent military modernization (primarily via Russian and Chinese arms), Croatia's NATO-aligned defense strategy and procurement decisions, Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal security dilemmas and limited military capacity amid ethnic fragmentation and briefly notes the defense orientations of NATO members Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania. Chapter 3 analyzes the role of external powers – including NATO, the EU, Russia, China, the United States, and Turkey – in the region's security, evaluating how their arms transfers, military assistance, and political influence affect Western Balkan stability. Chapter 4 assesses the geopolitical risks of the arms race, discussing how continued

militarization may reinforce mistrust and outline potential conflict scenarios under current conditions. Chapter 5 explores solutions by presenting policy recommendations to suppress the arms race, such as arms control or confidence-building measures, and considers the role of international actors in supporting these efforts. Finally, the last part of the thesis concludes the research by summarizing the findings and reflecting on implications for regional security and international theory.

Chapter I - Theoretical Framework and Historical Background

1.1. Theoretical Framework

In this part of the paper, the theoretical framework will be presented as the analytical ground for understanding the contemporary militarization and military modernization issue regarding the Western Balkans after 2014. The aim of this part is to explain, through chosen theories of international relations, the key motives and patterns of state actions that undergo militarization in the absence of a regional security framework. Starting with the realist school of international relations, as it best explains power competition in the region, the focus will be on the theory of neorealism and the concept of security dilemmas as the key instruments for understanding security dynamics between the states in the anarchic system of international relations. Moreover, the theoretical hypotheses that refer to the geopolitical rivalry of great powers, along with the concept of the postmodern army, will be considered. These theoretical foundations allow a deeper understanding and analysis of the domestic security decisions of countries in the region and the foreign policy influences that frame their defense sector.

1.1.1. Neorealism and Security Dilemma as a theoretical foundation

Neorealism, a modern and contemporary form of realism, also known as structural realism, represents the dominant paradigm of international relations when it comes to security matters and military dynamics. This theory explains the actions undertaken by the states as the result of the systematic pressures of international rivalry, which creates a significant limit in decision-making processes.

The Book "*Man, the State, and War*" by Kenneth Waltz published in 1959 gives the classification of theories of international relations into three levels of analysis, an individual, states and structures. In the book, the third level of analysis explains how the structures influence state defense behavior as a determining environment (considering the role of systematic factors or the influence of international anarchy on state behavior). According to that, "*Anarchy*" means the absence of a supreme authority that governs ethnic states. States can only rely on themselves, and each state must ensure its own survival. Safety is the primary interest of the state. The determining influence on international

relations is exerted by the structure of the environment in which the state is immersed, and not by the characteristics of the state or a person[4].

This theory had been further developed in Kenneth Waltz's book "*Theory of International Politics*" (1979). In the book, he explains how the structure of the international system affects the behavior of states. By this, Waltz laid the foundations of structural realism[5]. According to Waltz, one of the principles of neorealism is that the structural characteristics of international relations do not depend on small and medium sized powers, only large players. Main actors in international relations are states and their alliances with the main goal of protecting the national interests and defending their status quo in the contemporary system of international relations[6]. Achieving these goals is possible through force and alliances. Notably, the key principle in the Neorealist approach has remained the category of "*strength*" yet includes more than just military superiority. State acts in the international arena depending on their power. At the same time, the concept of a "*balance of power*" remains, which, in the opinion of Waltz, makes it possible to deter states from using force in international relations. There is a distinction between a simple balance of forces, known as a *bipolar system*, and a complex balance of forces involving multiple power centers[7].

Explaining how this stance makes states approach this dynamic of competition, since no country can know for certain the real intention of others, this "*security dilemma*" – creates a circumstance where one state undertakes measures to increase its security (for instance, modernization of the army, procurement of modernized weapons, or joining military alliances), other states comprehends this as a threat, so their response is in the same manner. The "*security dilemma*" creates a circumstance where the arms race is inevitable, and each step by a state is comprehended as a signal for others to act equally[8].

Even though the "*security dilemma*" is a concept mostly associated with structural realism, it goes way back to Waltz's neorealism and originates from classical realist thinking. The term was first introduced by John Herz in 1950 in his seminal article "*Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma*", where he defined it as a tragic consequence of the anarchic international system: "Groups or individuals living in such a system must be - and usually are - concerned about their security from

[4] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 159, 188, 227.
[5] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 79.
[6] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 93–94.
[7] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 161–170.
[8] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 105.

being attacked, subjected, dominated or annihilated by other groups and individuals." This forces them to arm themselves, which in turn threatens others, leading to a spiral of insecurity. Herz's formulation emphasized the unintended consequences of even defensive behavior[9].

Later, Robert Jervis, in his 1978 article "*Cooperation under the Security Dilemma*", developed the concept further by distinguishing between two variables: the offense-defense balance and the differentiability of offensive vs. defensive postures. Jervis argued that when defense has the advantage and defensive weapons are distinguishable from offensive ones, the security dilemma is mitigated[10]. However, in regions like the Western Balkans - characterized by low trust, lack of institutional frameworks, and minimal transparency in arms acquisition, the security dilemma is deepened, and cooperative signaling becomes impossible.

While the concept of the security dilemma was originally introduced by Herz and later expanded by Jervis, Glaser[11] offered a nuanced interpretation, emphasizing that under certain conditions - such as when offense and defense are distinct, and security requirements are limited - cooperation between states remains possible despite anarchy. His perspective refines the application of the dilemma, particularly for regions like the Western Balkans, where both perceived threats and alliance behavior are highly contextual. Building on Jervis's framework, Tang[12] argues that the security dilemma is not an inevitable outcome of anarchy but is shaped by the perception of intentions and the capacity for restraint. His analysis adds further nuance to how the dilemma unfolds in regions like the Western Balkans, where mutual mistrust and strategic ambiguity dominate security relations. It is also worth mentioning that, unlike the focus laid on by the traditional realist, Booth and Wheeler expand the notion through the concept of the "*security paradox*," emphasizing how fear and uncertainty can be mitigated through trust-building and cooperative security practices[13].

Yet, the concept of "*security dilemma*" remains especially relevant for the Western Balkans after 2014, when a significant change in the global security architecture occurred due to the annexation of Crimea, the cooling of relations between Russia and NATO, as well as the increased involvement of China in various regions, including the Balkan region. Since the region itself is burdened by historical

[9] John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," World Politics 2, no. 2 (1950): 157–180
[10] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," World Politics 30, no. 2 (1978): 187–194.
[11] Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," World Politics 50, no. 1 (1997): 184–190.
[12] Shiping Tang, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis," Security Studies 18, no. 3 (2009): 600–606.
[13] Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 228–250.

conflicts, ethnic tensions, and the absence of structured cooperation and the absence of a formal regional security mechanism, the dynamic takes an even more pronounced form. Croatia's defense partnership with NATO countries according to its membership in NATO with the arm procurement deals with foreign countries, Turkey's agreement with Kosovo of investing in a new factory for ammunition production, new defense alliance between Croatia, Kosovo, and Albania is perceived by Serbia as a threat. The majority of these countries are increasing their own defense investments, mostly with the support of NATO, the US, or Turkey. In response, Serbia significantly increased its defense budget, reaching €1.4 billion in 2022[14], and obtained advanced systems such as Pantsir-S1 air defenses from Russia and CH-95 drones from China. These moves caused concern in Croatia and Kosovo, leading them to reinforce their own defense partnerships, thus illustrating the logic of the security dilemma.

The Security Dilemma in this regard does not arise solely from a military perspective, but also from deep-rooted political disagreements, and unresolved status issues (for instance, Kosovo), including different foreign policy orientations. Some countries (such as Serbia) proclaimed military neutrality and cooperate with the Eastern countries, while others (Croatia, Albania, Montenegro) pursued full integration into the NATO structure.

The importance of the neorealist theory is reflected in the fact that it does not look for internal causes (for example national ideologies or leadership) but interprets the behavior of states as rational and predictable within an anarchic system. In this case, the absence of a regional agreement on arms control, together with shifts in global security dynamics, created ideal conditions for a recent arms race, with the potential for a new regional war. In this sense, neorealism and the security dilemma not only provide a theoretical framework for understanding the current situation but also a tool for predicting outcomes if current trends of militarization continue without appropriate mechanisms of control and cooperation.

1.1.2. Geopolitical competition of the great powers

Coherently, the context of contemporary international relations cannot be studied in light of the intensive militarization of the Western Balkans without understanding the broad concept of a

[14] Macrotrends, *Serbia Military Spending/Defense Budget 1992–2025*, https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/SRB/serbia/military-spending-defense-budget (accessed March 23, 2025).

geopolitical rivalry between the great powers in the region. A theoretical approach that is based on the concept of "*big game*" or "*geopolitical competition*" draws attention to the fact that regional policies and military decisions are not solely the product of internal factors, rather are often shaped by the interests and presence of external factors. This concept is notably relevant for small and medium-sized states located at geopolitical crossroads, such as the Western Balkans.

According to that approach, regions such as the Western Balkans commonly become realm for the indirect confrontation of the great powers. In the sphere of modern international affairs, this is reflected in the confrontation NATO-Russia, but also the increasing presence of USA, China, and Turkey, which use a combination of economic, political, and military influence to strengthen their position. The theoretical basis for this approach could be found in the works by authors such as Zbigniew Brezinski in the book "*The Grand Chessboard*"[15] and Robert Kaplan "*Balkan Ghosts*"[16] and "*The Revenge of Geography*"[17], who analyzed how the geographic position and historical vulnerability of the region make the Balkans strategically important to global powers. Zbigniew Brezinski describes the Balkans as a strategic point in shaping global order.

The analysis can be further deepened by insights from the theory of offensive realism presented by John Mearsheimer in the book "*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*", who argues that great struggle for the maximization of power, where there is no endpoint to the satisfaction of interests – the goal is hegemony in their own region. This behavior is also transferred to smaller powers, which, fearing isolation or attack, choose sides, join military alliances, or modernize their own capacities[18].

In this approach, it was specifically emphasized that the small and vulnerable societies, confronted with a lack of internal consensus and stable security system, become subject to pressures and political "guidance" from the great powers. Therefore, for instance, the influence of NATO and the US through military assistance and the presence of bases, such as Bondsteel, shape the security positions of Kosovo, Albania and Croatia, while the influence of Russia in Serbia and *Republika Srpska* is demonstrated through military exercises, donations, political support and information campaigns. On the one hand, China is using a different strategy, mostly an economical approach through investments,

[15] Zbigniew Brzezinski*, The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
[16] Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).
[17] Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2012).
[18] John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

especially through technology and security agreements with Serbia. Turkey, on the other hand, uses historical-cultural ties and cooperation in the field of military training and arms production.

According to *Proroković*, regional political elites are increasingly balancing between different great powers and even abandoning previously consistent foreign policy priorities (e.g., European integration), for the benefit of short-term security or economic gain[19]. This policy has opened the door to foreign policy interference in strategic sectors, especially by China and Turkey.

Noteworthy is the concept of "*clash of orders*" analyzed by Richard Sakwa – a clash of different visions of the international order: the liberal-democratic order of the West on the one hand, and the Eurasian approach promoted by Russia and China on the other. The Balkans, which lies at the border of these orders, become a zone of their conflict – not necessarily military, but through influence in the security sector, infrastructure, economy, and information space[20].

In this theoretical framework, militarization in the region arises not exclusively from internal security needs, but also from the need to preserve or strengthen a position in the regional hierarchy under the influence of global and regional powers. For this reason, geopolitical competition creates further strain on countries in the region to align themselves, modernize the army, and strengthen strategic partnerships – therefore amplifying the arms dynamics.

1.1.3. The concept of the postmodern Army as a theoretical framework

In modern studies, one important analytical tool for understanding the transformation of armed forces in small states is the concept of a "*postmodern army*," especially in the context of political, technological, and social change. The term was introduced by Charles Moskos in his work "*Toward a Postmodern Military: The United States as a Paradigm*", who argued that modern militaries are increasingly less oriented towards classical warfare, and increasingly towards specialized, professional structures that perform roles within international operations, digital security, and border control[21].

[19] Dušan Proroković, "Serbia's Foreign Policy and Relations with Russia as One of the Priorities," *Međunarodni Problemi* 75, no. 2 (2023): 300–306, https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2302293P.
[20] Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 191–193.
[21] Charles C. Moskos, "Toward a Postmodern Military: The United States as a Paradigm," in *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces after the Cold War,* ed. Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, and David R. Segal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 15–18

Unlike traditional military models focusing on defending territory from external hostility, the postmodern military includes partnership with international actors (such as NATO), enhancing military staff expertise, reduction of troops in favor of technology, and an increasing share of private companies in the security sphere. The model is especially present in countries such as Croatia and Albania, which have transformed their security systems towards NATO standards through Euro-Atlantic integration.

Based on the Charles Moskos theory, *Kuvekalović* points out in the paper that geopolitical circumstances and integration into international military structures were key to the transition from a mass, industrial army to a functional, flexible, and interoperable postmodern force. These changes largely shape the dynamics of rearmament – not through quantitative expansion, but through a qualitative leap in military technology[22].

This theoretical perspective is crucial to understanding how the Western Balkan countries, with the support or pressure of external actors, are redefining their security capacities and approaches to arming – not only in response to internal security challenges, but also as the part of political positioning in regional and global security architecture.

1.2. Historical Background

Understanding the contemporary processes of militarization and army modernization in the Western Balkans after 2014 demands reliance on the deeper historical context of the development of defense capabilities in the region. The historical context aims to present the key stages in the development of the military-industrial complex in the Balkans, from the period of Ottoman occupation, through the creation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and later Socialist Yugoslavia as a single military block, to its dissolution and consequences for the National Military Industries[23]. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of military doctrines in the former Yugoslavia, the role of self-production of weapons, the geographical distribution of military capacities, as well as the subsequent fragmentation and privatization of the military-industrial sector during the 1990s. A review of international agreements, such as the Dayton and Florence agreements, will be key to understanding the institutional

[22] Jovan Kuvekalović, "The Impact of Geopolitical Conditions in the Emergence of Postmodern Military in the Western Balkans: The Cases of Croatia and Albania," *Međunarodni Problemi* 70, no. 4 (2018): 432–452, https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP1804432K.
[23] Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804–2012* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 4–25.

framework that was supposed to regulate regional security in the post-conflict period [2425]. This analysis will provide a more detailed understanding of the conditions that preceded the modern arms race, and which have largely shaped today's security architecture of the region.

Before the formation of socialist Yugoslavia after World War II, the region of the Western Balkans was subject to foreign influences and divisions for centuries. During the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian periods, the region was politically and militarily fragmented, without a common security system. During the interwar period of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1918-1941), attempts were made to create a unified armed force and military alliances aimed at containing potential threats such as the Weimar Republic. However, internal ethnic tensions and the lack of industrial capacity limited effective military development. The occupation and civil war during World War II further devastated the region, but at the same time laid the groundwork for the partisan resistance movement and the future military organization of the new socialist state. The paper will analyze the role of the key factories in Yugoslavia (like *Zastava*, *Soko*, *Đuro Đaković*), political changes that affected the military industry and its priorities (including the split Tito-Stalin, and non-alignment movement), so as the role of the international actors (help of the U.S. in building the military-industrial complex, and the relations with USSR). Special attention will be paid to the transformation of the military industry in the period between the 1970s and 1980s, and the results of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, including the fragmentation of the military-industrial complex and redefining the security policies in the successor states [26]. This chronological ground allows a deeper understanding of post-Yugoslavia security challenges in the context of the intensive militarization and modern arms race after 2014.

1.2.1. Formation of the Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex (1945-1955)

In the aftermath of World War II, the newly established Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), initiated an ambitious project of state-building and military consolidation. The results of the wartime occupation and civil war, combined with the desire to secure sovereignty and

[24] Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1998), 230–250
[25] Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), *Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control (Florence Agreement)*, 1996, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/b/119597.pdf (accessed March 25, 2025).
[26] Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1995), 131–150.

strategic autonomy, led the communist party under Josip Broz Tito's leadership to prioritize the development of a strong and self-reliant defense sector [2728]. The initial foundation of the Yugoslav military-industrial complex can be traced back to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, but its concrete development and the structure that was analyzed in the paper took shape in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the state in the central role in organizing arms production, military research, and the territorial deployment of defense capacities.

One of the crucial aims of the newly established country was to reduce reliance on foreign arms imports. This ambition was especially reinforced by the 1948 Tito-Stalin split, which besides severing ties with the Soviet bloc, also underscored the strategic need for self-sufficiency in military affairs [29]. This development helped Yugoslavia to become more self-resilient, especially taking into consideration the formation of the "*Iron Curtain*" during the Cold War period, and the influence by the Communist bloc [30]. As a result, the Yugoslav government began heavily investing in the domestic production of arms and ammunition. The formation of the Ministry of Defense's Directorate for Military Production (*Uprava za vojnu proizvodnju*) facilitated central planning and control of the expanding industrial base [3132].

The organizational structure and key figures shaping Yugoslavia's military-industrial complex (MIC) merit detailed examination. The Ministry of Defense (MoD), through its Directorate for Military Production (*Uprava za vojnu proizvodnju*), exercised central authority over military affairs and arms manufacturing coordination[33]. The Yugoslav People's Army (*JNA*), formed in 1945 from the Partisan-led People's Liberation Army (*NOVJ*), served as the MIC's primary consumer and expansion driver. Under Tito's oversight, the JNA General Staff dictated equipment needs, directly influencing industrial priorities[34]. Complementing this, the State Security Administration (*UDBA, Uprava državne bezbednosti*), created in 1946, ensured security by suppressing dissent - such as pro-Soviet factions

[27] John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
[28] Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias: State-Building and Legitimation, 1918–2005* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
[29] Svetozar Rajak, "No Bargaining Chips, No Spheres of Interest: The Yugoslav Origins of Cold War Non-Alignment," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 146–179, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00434.
[30] Ivo Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito: Cominformist Splits in Yugoslav Communism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 145.
[31] John R. Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There Was a Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 234.
[32] Robert Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex: Self-Reliance and Its Legacy," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, no. 3 (2018): 345–367, https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2018.1487205.
[33] Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History*, 234.
[34] Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 567; Glenny, The Balkans, 386–388.

post-1948 - and safeguarding industrial secrets against espionage amid Cold War tensions[35]. Tito's vision of post-1948 self-reliance shaped MIC development, while *UDBA* chief *Ranković* enforced internal loyalty and secrecy[36]. Military leaders such as *Koča Popović* and *Ivan Gošnjak* oversaw early modernization efforts. This interplay of centralized control under Tito, military direction via the *JNA*, and security enforcement by the *UDBA* established a robust framework for the MIC's growth.

In the system explained, the key factories were established or expanded across the republic[37]. *Zastava Arms* in *Kragujevac*, Serbia, became one of the leading producers of small arms and artillery. In Croatia, *Đuro Đaković*, specialized in armored vehicles and heavy military machinery. The *Soko* aircraft factory in *Mostar*, Bosnia and Herzegovina developed light aircraft and training jets, while *Pretis* near *Vogošća* produced munitions. These production centers were strategically distributed across the federation, aiming to promote interdependence and resilience against potential internal or external threats.

The development of the defense industry was supported by the USSR in the initial years after World War II, while the American the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP), particularly between 1951 and 1955, further accelerated MIC growth despite Yugoslavia's non-alignment[38]. Although politically non-aligned, Yugoslavia received substantial financial and technical support from the United States during this period, which further accelerated the growth of its military capacities [39].

The initial stage of Yugoslavia's defense-industrial complex, therefore, reflects the intersection of geopolitical isolation, ideological autonomy, and strategic necessity. By the mid-1950s, the country had laid the groundwork for one of the most advanced and independent military production systems in the developing world - one that would later become a core of Yugoslavia's position in the Non-Aligned Movement and a major source of arms exports to the "*Global South*"[40].

1.2.2. Military Production, Specialization, Strategic Distribution, and Fragmentation (1950-1990)

[35] Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito*, 145
[36] Banac, *With Stalin Against Tito*, 150.
[37] Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex," 358; Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History*, 241.
[38] Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era: The U.S. Army Between Korea and Vietnam* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1986); Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex," 360.
[39] Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex"; Rajak, "The Yugoslav Origins of Cold War Non-Alignment."
[40] Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex"; Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias*.

The next phase of the MIC started after the consolidation in the period immediately after World War II, characterized by an increasing degree of specialization, technological progress, and export ambitions. The period from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s was a time of intensive production, regional distribution of production capacities, and increasingly strong economic and foreign policy role of the Yugoslav military sector[41].

The doctrine guiding the development was "*National Defense and social self-protection*," besides involving an organized army, it also involved the mobilization of the entire Yugoslav society in the event of external aggression. The doctrine heavily relied on the domestic military industry's capacity to provide weapons, ammunition, and technique for the regular and reserve forces.

According to the defined goals, key companies developed arms segments, which, according to later specifications, would serve as the basis after the country's dissolution into independent states. Key factories such as *Zastava* Arms (*Kragujevac*, Serbia). *SOKO* (*Mostar*, BiH), *Đuro Đaković* (*Slavonski Brod*, Croatia), *Pretis* (*Vogošća*, BiH), *Sloboda* (*Čačak*, Serbia) and *Prvi partizan* (*Užice*, Serbia) specialized in small arms, aircraft, armored vehicles, and munitions. Their production lines laid the foundation for post-Yugoslav defense sectors [42].

The initial idea was that this production network would be strategically deployed to provide interdependence between states and reduce risk in the event of internal or external attacks. There was also the idea of combining military production with the civil sector (so-called "dual purpose"), which further contributed to MIK's economic viability. According to the reports, in this period, Yugoslavia successfully produced 80-90% of its military needs, including infantry weapons, vehicles, artillery, communication systems, and aircraft[43]. Moreover, the military industry became one of the main exporters of weapons to Non-Aligned Countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Due to these factors, Yugoslavia gained military autonomy, with MIK playing an essential role in foreign policy positioning. Belgrade strengthened its global ties and foreign political alliances outside the bipolar system of the Cold War. In the early 1950s, defense spending consumed about 22% of Yugoslavia's Gross national product[44]. The later period from the 1960s to the 1970s indicates that military spending remained at the same level, being a significant component of the

[41] Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex," 348–350.
[42] Dušan Bilandžić, *Historija Socijalističke Federativne Republike Jugoslavije: Glavni Procesi 1918–1985* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1985), 415–420; Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex," 352–355.
[43] Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History*, 247.
[44] Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex," 349.

national budget, reflecting the aims of sustaining defense capabilities and supporting the export of military equipment.

The 1970s and 1980s marked the peak and gradual transformation of Yugoslavia's MIC, shaped by internal reforms and Cold War tensions. Partial decentralization of defense production began after the adoption of the 1974 Constitution, which expanded the autonomy of the republics and provinces[4546]. However, strategic control remained under the Ministry of Defense leadership, individual republics gained more influence over local production facilities and development plans. Yugoslavia demonstrated self-management socialism, where worker councils and republican institutions played a significant role in economic planning, including defense production.

The MIC began changing focus toward more complex and high-tech military products. The 1980s represented increasing investment in electronic warfare systems, radar technology, communications equipment, and advanced aviation. The aircraft industry - particularly the *Soko* factory in *Mostar* - launched projects such as the J-22 *Orao* ground-attack aircraft, co-developed with Romania, and the G-4 Super *Galeb* jet trainer. In the armored vehicle sector, *Đuro Đaković* in Croatia produced the M-84 main battle tank, a highly advanced version of the Soviet T-72, representing one of Yugoslavia's most significant military engineering achievements[47].

Yugoslavia also acquired small arms, including variants of the AK-series rifles (*Zastava* M70), machine guns, mortars, and artillery systems. According to reports, by the mid-1980s, Yugoslavia exported military equipment to over 80 countries, with key clients including Iraq, Libya, Algeria, Angola, and India. In some years, military exports generated over $1 billion in revenue, making the defense industry one of the leading export sectors of the Yugoslav economy.

Regardless of the successful export results, structural weaknesses began appearing. The economic policy of Yugoslavia in this period was heavily reliant on state subsidies and foreign loans to sustain innovation and production, which was reflected in the MIC. Moreover, technological gaps became evident in comparison to NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, and economic inefficiencies typical of the broader Yugoslav economy - such as overemployment and production delays - began

[45] Fred Singleton, *A Short History of the Yugoslav Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 314–316.
[46] Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, 99–101
[47] Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex", 354–358; Glenny, *The Balkans*, 494–496.

affecting military production as well. Still, in the context of the Global South, Yugoslavia preserved a competitive edge, often offering quality arms at lower prices with favorable political terms[48].

Domestically, military spending remained relatively high. Figures varied in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, with estimates suggesting that throughout the 1980s, defense spending fluctuated between 4.5% and 6% of GDP, maintaining Yugoslavia among the higher spenders in Europe in relative terms[49]. This heavy investment reflected the continuing commitment to maintaining strategic autonomy, particularly as tensions between blocs reignited with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and NATO's military buildup.

In summary, the 1970s and 1980s were marked by the high point of Yugoslavia's MIC in both technological and export capacities. Yet, this period showed the early signs of the systematic and structural issues that would later be worsened by the economic crisis of the late 1980s and the political disintegration of the country that followed.

1.2.3. Nuclear policy of Yugoslavia: between ambitions and limitations

One of the key aspects when analyzing the domestic military reforms was the development of the nuclear policy in Yugoslavia, although mostly neglected when considered among other defensive factors. One often overlooked aspect of Yugoslavia's defense reforms was its nuclear policy, which, while never resulting in a weapon, reflected broader strategic ambitions[50]. First nuclear energy negotiations in Yugoslavia started after World War II, in late 1945, primarily in scientific and professional circles, led by the eminent physicist *Pavle Savić*, and culminated in the formation of the first Yugoslav institute for nuclear energy, also known as *Vinča Institute*[51].

In the initial phase, the focus of the nuclear program was strictly peaceful, with the aim of creating a scientific base, educating cadres, and investigating the structure of matter and radioactivity.

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[48] Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History*, 249–250; Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavias*, 287–289.
[49] Niebuhr, "The Yugoslav Military-Industrial Complex," 358; Filip Ejdus, Military Modernization and Arms Race Dynamics in the Western Balkans, Policy Brief 02/20, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), February 2020, https://ifsh.de/en/publikationen/policy-brief/policy-brief-0220 (accessed March 30, 2025).
[50] Dragomir Bondžić, *Između ambicija i iluzija: Nuklearna politika Jugoslavije 1945–1990* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2020), 17–31.
[51] Bondžić, *Između ambicija i iluzija*, 18–23.

In 1948, *Vinča Institute* was established near Belgrade, which became a central scientific institution in the field of nuclear research. Alongside, other institutes were established in Ljubljana (*Jozef Stefan*), and Zagreb (*Ruđer Bošković*)[52]. However, already in the late 1940s, after the conflict with the Informbiro and the severing of relations with the USSR, the state leadership began to consider the military use of nuclear energy as well. Conditioned by geopolitical isolation and fear of Soviet aggression, Yugoslav leaders began to explore the potential of developing their nuclear weapons.The project was kept secret under state security (*UDBA*), which had been involved in research since 1948. By the late 1940s, Yugoslav leaders began exploring military nuclear applications under the secret supervision of the UDBA, despite limited technical capabilities[53].

The Federal Nuclear Energy Commission was established in 1955, which marked a new phase of development. With a newly established institute, the focus shifted to energy independence and nuclear power plant planning[54]. Nevertheless, the decentralization of the system after the 1974 Constitution. The year, when the republics gained more autonomy, made it difficult to coordinate and implement major federal projects. Of particular importance is the secret task of "*Kozara*", initiated personally by Josip Broz Tito after the Indian nuclear test in 1974. The task was to analyze the technical, personnel, and political capacities of Yugoslavia for the eventual development of nuclear weapons[55]. The military, scientists and security services participated in the project, but concrete results were never achieved – both due to internal weaknesses and international pressures and financial constraints. Although multiple sites were considered for the construction of nuclear power plants (Belgrade, Prevlaka, Osijek, Novi Grad), The only realized project was the *Krško* power plant in Slovenia, whose construction began in 1975. The reactor was purchased from the American Westinghouse Company, and the plant was commissioned in 1981 as a joint project of Slovenia and Croatia[56]. The planned construction of other power plants was suspended, especially after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, which further intensified public resistance to nuclear power. In 1989, Serbia adopted a law banning the construction of nuclear power plants, which is still in force[57]. Yugoslav

[52] Bondžić, *Između ambicija i iluzija*, 47-62.
[53] Bondžić, *Između ambicija i iluzija*, 63–80.
[54] Bondžić, *Između ambicija i iluzija*, 83–89.
[55] Bondžić, *Između ambicija i iluzija*, 113–117.
[56] World Nuclear Association, *Nuclear Power in Slovenia*, 2025, https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-o-s/slovenia (accessed April 3, 2025).
[57] Sarajevo Times, "Unfulfilled Nuclear Ambitions of Yugoslavia – From the Power Plant to the Atomic Bomb," *Sarajevo Times*, 2024, https://sarajevotimes.com/unfulfilled-nuclear-ambitions-of-yugoslavia-from-the-power-plant-and-heating-plant-in-bih-to-the-atomic-bomb/ (accessed April 3, 2025).

nuclear policy, while never leading to the development of weapons, remains significant as an indication of the Yugoslav leadership's ambitions to position itself as a technologically and strategically sovereign power. At the same time, it represents the internal political tensions, decentralization, and limitations of the federal system that ultimately thwarted the realization of these plans[58].

1.2.4. Fragmentation of the military-industrial complex, wars, and the institutional framework (1991-2014)

The beginning of the 1990s marked a significant shift in international relations. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia collapsed in the early 1990s, which marked the end of a unified military and industrial system[59]. The military system and institutional coordination mechanism collapsed due to the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and later in. Alongside the disintegration of the political system, the army (Yugoslav People's Army) was dissolved, which paved the way for the establishment of new national armies[60].

As a consequence of the wars in the 1990s, the military industry in the region experienced a significant decline but also a transformation. Due to sanctions, destruction, hyperinflation, and loss of international markets, some factories were closed or reoriented, while others, especially in Serbia and Croatia, adapted to war needs and continued production. A huge portion of the weapons used during the conflict came from former Yugoslav stocks, while new states began to rely on imports and informal markets, often from Hungary, Ukraine, Russia, or Western countries. For example, Croatia, on the one hand, imported weapons from Germany and Hungary before the conflict even started, while Serbia, in on the other, drew resources from existing factories and JNA stockpiles[61].

The legal and institutional structure of the factories changed due to the fragmentation of the military-industrial complex. Factories such as *Đuro Đaković* in Croatia, *Zastava* in Serbia, or *SOKO* in Mostar have changed and later became subject to privatization, nationalization, or liquidation. In many

[58] Bondžić, *Između ambicija i iluzija*, 120–126
[59] Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, 87–94.
[60] James Gow, *The Serbian Project, and Its Adversaries: A Strategy of War Crimes* (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), 33–46.
[61] Robert Thomas, *The Politics of Serbia in the 1990s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 118–123; Filip Ejdus, Military Modernization and Arms Race Dynamics in the Western Balkans, Policy Brief 02/20, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH), February 2020, https://ifsh.de/en/publikationen/policy-brief/policy-brief-0220 (accessed March 30, 2025).

cases, production was slowed down or completely suspended. During the same period, the institutions responsible for Strategic Defense Planning were neglected and suspended due to the shift of political focus, since the strategic goal became the restoration of sovereignty and institutional control.

It is worth emphasizing the fact that throughout the entire dissolution process, international organizations with key states played a crucial role in establishing peace, which resulted in key agreements ending the war and defining the security landscape of the region. The most important among them is the Dayton Peace Agreement (1995), which formally ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and enabled its internal order through entity division and international supervision. Dayton, however, was crucial in institutionalizing the existing divisions and made it impossible to build a single security sector, resulting in poor coordination and the existence of multiple entity structures of the armed forces until the 2000s reform[62].

Moreover, the regional arms control agreement (also known as the Florence Agreement) (1996), concluded under Article IV of the Dayton Agreement, was an attempt by the international community to introduce measures of transparency and control of military equipment in the region[63]. This agreement explicitly specifies inspections, data exchange, and quotes for the maximum number of weapons, but its implementation was limited and relied on the voluntary cooperation of involved parties[64]. The stabilization period occurred between 1999 and 2014, with an emphasis on diversification of foreign policy orientations. On the one side, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Albania have focused on NATO integration and the modernization of their defense sectors to Western standards. Serbia, on the other hand, proclaimed a policy of military neutrality, with strategic ties with Russia and later China[65]. A destabilizing moment in the region occurred in 2008 when Kosovo declared independence, the result of a decade of lasting conflict. Kosovo, later in 2015, began building its security forces with the assistance of the United States and NATO[66]. Until 2014, the Western Balkans region was left without a single updated security mechanism, with significant differences in military-

[62] Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1998); David Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy after Dayton* (London: Pluto Press, 2000)
[63] Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), *Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control (Florence Agreement)*, 1996, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/b/119597.pdf (accessed March 25, 2025).
[64] OSCE, *Florence Agreement*; Filip Ejdus, *Military Modernization and Arms Race Dynamics in the Western Balkans*.
[65] Filip Ejdus, "Serbia and Croatia," *in Nations and Nationalism in East-Central Europe*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[66] Peoples Dispatch, "The Shifting Alliances and Militarization of the Western Balkans," *Peoples Dispatch*, 2025, https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/03/26/the-shifting-alliances-and-militarization-of-the-western-balkans/ (accessed April 3, 2025).

industrial capacities, political strategies, and international partnerships. This period forms the basis for understanding the new wave of militarization that followed the Ukrainian crisis and changes in the global security order[67].

Conclusion

Chapter 1 has established the necessary analytical and historical foundations for understanding the post-2014 militarization trends in the Western Balkans. The integration of neorealist theory and the security dilemma concept has described how systemic factors - particularly anarchy, mistrust, and uncertainty - continue to fuel competitive armament in a region marked by ethnic divisions, unresolved conflicts, and asymmetrical foreign alignments.

The chapter combined this theoretical framework with a focused historical overview of Yugoslavia's military-industrial legacy, its decentralization, and eventual fragmentation. This background demonstrates that contemporary security dynamics are not solely reactions to recent crises but stem from persistent institutional patterns and strategic behaviors shaped by Cold War-era development, post-conflict disintegration, and diverging post-1990s trajectories.

This conclusion underlines a key premise for the rest of the thesis: that effective policy recommendations must address both systemic incentives for militarization and the historical legacies that sustain them. Understanding these dual dimensions is essential to crafting a more stable and cooperative regional security framework.

[67] Vuk Vuksanović, "Arming the Region: What Scenario Is the Western Balkans Preparing For?" *Kosovo Online*, 2024, https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/arming-region-what-scenario-western-balkans-preparing-30-8-2024 (accessed April 3, 2025).

Chapter II - National Defense Strategies and Militarization Trends in the Western Balkans Since 2014

This chapter provides a comparative overview of the national security and defense strategies, military-industrial developments, trends in the military-industrial complex, and foreign influences in the Western Balkans from 2014 onward. It expands upon the historical context provided in the previous chapter and focuses on how each successor state reconstructed and modernized its military sector after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Crucially, the year 2014 was selected due to its relevance for the analysis as the starting point of militarization trends across the Western Balkans. Although quantitative evidence – such as defense expenditure or arms procurement data – may be seen in later years (especially post-2019), qualitative indicators confirm that the foundational shifts in regional militarization occurred earlier. These include formal adoption of national defense strategies and aligning domestic policies in order to strengthen military capabilities, legislative approvals for increasing defense budgets, long-term militarization plans, and the initiation of joint military exercises. These events occurring after 2014 laid the institutional groundwork for later militarization and trends evident in the following years. The following analysis of each Yugoslavia successor state will demonstrate this progression, examining national security and defense strategies, military expenditure and budgets, armament production and industrial capacities, and foreign influence.

2.1.Republic of Serbia: Military Strategy, Armament Development, and Foreign Influence (2014-2025)

Geopolitical tensions occurring in 2014 have changed the global security architecture, accelerating the transition period from a unipolar to a multipolar world order [68]. These changes had a profound affection on Serbia's regional position, reshaping Serbia's threat perceptions, especially regarding its policy of military neutrality and balancing between East and West.

[68] Kenneth N. Waltz, "Intimations of Multipolarity," in *The New World Order: Contrasting Theories, ed. Birthe Hansen and Bertel Heurlin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 17–26.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 after a referendum dismissing the West's objections to the legitimacy of such decisions, which provoked a hard reaction from NATO and the EU. This event marked a turning point in relations between Russia and the West, leading to the imposition of sanctions on Russia. This created a complex stance for Serbia due to its policy of military neutrality since Serbia had to align itself regarding this issue[69]. This event prompted Serbia to consider strengthening its defense capabilities to preserve military neutrality in an increasingly unstable global and regional environment. NATO's response regarding Russia's annexation was adopting a goal at the Wales summit (September 2014) for members to reach 2% of GDP for defense within ten years, signaling a new arms race[70]. Since Serbia's neighboring country, Croatia, was a NATO member, and Montenegro was in the process of joining NATO, started increasing its military budget and modernizing its defense capabilities, which caused pressure on Serbia to answer to these regional dynamics.

The escalation of regional tensions influenced Serbia's regional position during the migrant crisis reached its peak in 2015. During this period, hundreds of thousands of migrants, primarily from conflict-affected regions such as Syria and Afghanistan, crossed Western Balkan countries as a key transit route into Europe. Serbia and Croatia have faced disputes over managing the movement of migrants, since Croatia has accused Serbia of diverting migrants towards its borders, while Serbia has criticized Croatia for closing its border and returning migrants. Tension escalated when Croatia decided to temporarily close its borders with Serbia (*Bajakovo*), sparking diplomatic confrontations, with both countries engaging in heated rhetoric through official statements and media platforms. This strain prompted Serbia to strengthen defense capacities due to the vulnerability of its regional position, especially in the context of historical disagreements with Croatia[71].

An additional issue influencing Serbia's regional position was the official institutionalization of *Kosovo's armed forces. Although the Kosovo Army was officially formed only in 2018, discussion on the transformations of the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) into the regular army began early in 2014. Moreover, in March 2014, Kosovo's parliament passed constitutional amendments authorizing the creation of a national armed force, provoking a strong repercussion from Serbia. Belgrade perceived

[69] Nikola Stojković, *Nastanak ukrajinske krize: Bezbednosni izazovi i refleksije na međunarodni poredak* (Beograd: Fakultet političkih nauka, 2015), http://repozitorijum.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/865/1/Nastanak%20ukrajinske%20krize.pdf (accessed April 6, 2025).
[70] NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government*, September 5, 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm (accessed April 8, 2025).
[71] Guy Delauney, "Migrant Crisis: Croatia Closes Border Crossings with Serbia," *BBC News*, September 18, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34288188 (accessed April 8, 2025).

this move as a direct challenge to its territorial integrity and sovereignty, given its non-recognition of Kosovo's independence[72]. Tensions escalated further in 2015 when Kosovo intensified its efforts to secure international backing for its military, including training and equipment from NATO and the United States. Compounding the tension, Montenegro officially received invitation to join NATO in 2015 (officially became a member in 2017), which further increased the pressure on Serbia. Besides Montenegro, Albania and Croatia have become NATO's members since 2009, adopting goals towards modernization of its armies according to the NATO standards.

These global and regional developments culminated in Serbia's complete reform of its security sector after 2014. Although, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia was adopted in 2019, and the Defense Strategy of the Republic of Serbia was adopted in 2020, the first strategy was adopted in 2009, and the draft of a new strategy started in 2016 officially, while the talks were initiated in 2015. These documents laid the foundation to understanding the current security policy, strategic priorities, and reasons for modernization of the defense systems.

The National Security Strategy points out that the Republic of Serbia faces complex challenges, from geopolitical instability and migrant flows to hybrid threats, cyber-attacks, regional uncertainty, and frozen conflicts such as the situation in Kosovo and Metohija. One of the key security challenges is the violation of territorial integrity, as well as the operation of foreign intelligence and non-governmental structures that can threaten political and economic stability[73].

The defense strategy expands on the objectives of the security policy – preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, military neutrality, improvement of the capacities of the Serbian Armed Forces, and development of the domestic defense industry as a strategic resource. Special emphasis was placed on flexible response to all types of crises, strengthening interoperability with international partners, but with strict preservation of political independence and military neutrality of Serbia[74].

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[72] Fatos Bytyci, "Kosovo Approves New Army Despite Serb Opposition, NATO Criticism," *Reuters*, December 14, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/kosovo-approves-new-army-despite-serb-opposition-nato-criticism-idUSKBN1OD17X (accessed April 8, 2025)

[73] Republic of Serbia, *Strategija nacionalne bezbednosti Republike* Srbije (Belgrade: Ministry of Defence, 2019), 6–11, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog2_strategijanacionalnebezbednostirs_eng_1731678276.pdf (accessed April 6, 2025).

[74] Republic of Serbia, *Strategija odbrane Republike Srbije* (Belgrade: Ministry of Defence, 2020), 15–22, https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog1_strategijanacionalnebezbednostirs_srp_1731677306.pdf (accessed April 6, 2025).

Based on these documents, Serbia sees the future of its security policy in building an efficient, integrated, and adaptable national security system, which includes both traditional military components, as well as civil protection, cybersecurity, crisis management and security cooperation with key international actors.

The Defense White Paper (2023) further emphasizes the importance of the defense industry, modernization of equipment, improvement of command-and-control systems, as well as the development of domestic capabilities in cyberspace. The document mentions plans to upgrade military intelligence and cyber structures, increase research and development budgets, and a focus on dual technologies that can serve both the civilian and military sectors[75].

The medium-term plans of the Ministry of Defense (2020-2026) clearly recognize modernization, strengthening of military infrastructure and expansion of industrial base as priorities. Special attention was paid to diversification of arms imports and exports, improvement of cooperation with foreign partners, but also to strengthening domestic production through investments in factories such as *Zastava* Arms, *Prvi Partizan*, and *Teleoptik*. It also mentions an increase in the military budget in the coming years, with goals to stabilize defense spending at about 2% of GDP, which is in line with international standards[76].

These strategic documents together form the basis for understanding the broader security and defense context, which will be elaborated in the following subchapter through topics such as industrial production, military modernization, budget allocations, international cooperation, and the influence of foreign powers.

Serbia, like many successor states, has faced problems with inherited outdated technology, a limited budget for MIC, and a decline in operational capabilities in 2014 due to years of non-investing in modernization. The military budget was approximately 777 million USD (which was 1.6% of GDP)

[75] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *Bela knjiga odbrane Republike Srbije 2023* (Belgrade: Ministry of Defence, 2023), 23–35, https://www.vs.rs/document/document/files/7AB9D68F7A1C11EE9E880050568F5424/1/Bela_knjiga_odbrane_Republike_Srbije_2023_White_Paper_On_Defence.pdf (accessed April 6, 2025).
[76] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *Srednjoročni plan Ministarstva odbrane za period 2021–2023* (Belgrade: Ministry of Defence, 2021), https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/prilog_srednjorocni_plan_mo_2021_2023_1731677925.pdf (accessed April 4, 2025); Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *Srednjoročni plan Ministarstva odbrane za period 2023–2025* (Belgrade: Ministry of Defence, 2023), https://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/dodaci/sr_plan_mo_2023_2025_1731677791.pdf (accessed April 4, 2025).

in 2014, and the next year it decreased to 515 million[77]. The equipment was mostly based on techniques from the SFRY era, such as MiG-21 and MiG-29 fighter aircraft acquired in the 1980s, G-4 Super *Galeb* and J-22 *Orao* school/assault aircraft, M-84 tanks, and armored vehicles from the 1980s, and Klub and Neva medium-range air defense systems from the 1970s[78]. Many aircraft had limited functionality, and the military had limited number of modern helicopters for transport, search, and rescue. Since the Ukrainian conflict demonstrated that the era of conventional type of waging war has not been over, neighboring countries, such as Croatia, have started rebuilding their arsenals with modern weaponry. The goal was to stabilize the budget, and to enter arrangements for the purchase of new combat aircraft and air defense systems.

The foundations were laid for later militarization process in 2015 and 2016. After reaching a minimum in the military budget in 2015, a significant increase occurred at the end of 2016 in defense spending. Amending the budget and adding additional funds, the military budget reached 654 million USD (1.6% GDP). The surplus was used for a helicopters acquisition, 9 H145M from Airbus Helicopters, with Airbus committing to support domestic institution, and 2 Mi-17V5 from Russia. Moreover, within the specified timeframe (2014-2016), Russia donated six used MiG-29 fighters, forming ten operational MiG-29s (4 inherited from the *JNA*), and later receiving an addition 4 MiG-29s from Belarus. Nevertheless, modernization of the army and air defense was the next crucial step undertaken to reform the military industrial complex. Special units were equipped with modern infantry weapons, ballistic protection, and a new generation of uniforms.

Over the interval from 2016 to 2020, the Serbian Armed Forces underwent a major modernization wave, significantly advancing its air force, air defense, and ground troops. Besides acquisitions in 2014-2016 of fighters and helicopters, Serbia also became the first European country to deploy Chinese CH-92A armed drones and introduced FK-3 (HQ-22) medium-range air defense systems alongside Russian Pantsir-S1 short-range systems[79]. The Army received thirty modernized T-

[77] MacroTrends, "Serbia Military Spending/Defense Budget 1992–2025," 2025, https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/SRB/serbia/military-spending-defense-budget (accessed April 8, 2025).
[78] CEGIT (*Centar za geostrateška istraživanja i terorizam*), *Modernizacija Vojske Srbije i međunarodna vojna saradnja* 2016–2021 (2021), 12–14, https://cegit.org/modernizacija-vojske-srbije-i-medjunarodna-vojna-saradnja-2016-2021-sa-okvirnim-pregledom-modernizacije-zemalja-regiona/ (accessed April 8, 2025); Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *Srednjoročni plan Ministarstva odbrane za period* 2021–2023.
[79] *Radio Televizija Vojvodine* (RTV), "*Nastavlja se modernizacija RV i PVO Vojske Srbije*," 2022, https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/nastavlja-se-modernizacija-rv-i-pvo-vojske-srbije_1239975.html (accessed April 8, 2025); Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *Bela knjiga odbrane Republike Srbije* 2023 (Belgrade: Ministry of Defence, 2023), 26–30.

72MS tanks, 30 BRDM-2MS armored vehicles, and domestically produced *Lazar* 3 and *Miloš* armored vehicles, as well as NORA B-52 self-propelled howitzers[80]. Additionally, Mistral 3 missiles were integrated into the PASARS air defense system. Defense spending exceeded $1 billion annually, enabling these acquisitions and reinforcing Serbia's military neutrality through enhanced deterrence capabilities.

In the period succeeding 2020, Serbia accelerated its military modernization with a record defense budget of $1.46 billion (2.5% of GDP) in 2021, enabling new ambitious acquisitions[81]. One of the breakthrough moments for Serbia's defense capabilities post-2020 was the purchase of 12 French *Rafale* fighter jets (10 single-seat, two twin-seat) for €3 billion, making Serbia the first Balkan country to operate these advanced 4.5-gen fighters[82]. Additionally, Serbia secured 2 Airbus C-295 transport planes (€66M) and explored acquiring Turkish Bayraktar TB2 or Chinese CH-95 combat drones.

In ground forces, Serbia is modernizing its M-84 tanks (T-72 variant and M-80 IFVs with new sensors, armor, and communications. New M20 6×6 MRAP vehicles (based on *Lazar*) and donated US M1117 Guardian armored vehicles enhance mobility and protection. Air defense underwent additional upgrades with Chinese FK-3 (HQ-22) and HQ-17AE short-range systems, complementing existing Pantsir-S1 and Mistral-equipped PASARS.

In near future, Serbia plans to acquire more *Rafales*, helicopters (especially H145M or medium-lift models), and domestic drones. Additionally, full digitalization (C4ISR) and radar modernization for drone/stealth detection has become one of the priorities. With sustained spending (~2% of GDP) and diversified suppliers (Russia, China, EU, US), Serbia aims to solidify its military neutrality through a layered defense system and regional deterrence.

Besides international cooperation, Serbia's military modernization was possible due to its defense industry, ensuring self-reliance. Key state-owned manufacturers are *Zastava* Arms, *Krusik*, *Utva*, and *Jugoimport-SDPR*, which were modernized with the opening of new factories and expanding production capabilities[83]. Major achievements for domestic production were *Lazar* 3 armored vehicles, *Nora* B-52 self-propelled howitzers, and *ALAS* anti-tank missiles (produced in BSS in *Velika Plana*);

[80] Ministry of Defence, *Bela knjiga odbrane*, 27–29.
[81] Ministry of Defence, *Bela knjiga odbrane*, 24; Ministry of Defence, *Srednjoročni plan 2023–2025.*
[82] Dassault Aviation, "Serbia Acquires 12 Rafale Fighters," 2024, https://www.dassault-aviation.com/en/group/press/press-kits/serbia-acquires-12-rafale-fighters/ (accessed April 8, 2025).
[83] Ministry of Defence, *Bela knjiga odbrane*, 31–35.

6×6 and 8×8 military trucks for domestic employment and exports (e.g., UAE) (produced in FAP *Priboj*); artillery shells (155mm), mortar rounds, and 30mm ammunition for domestic and export markets (*Krušik* & *Sloboda Čačak*); Developing drones (*Pegaz* MALE UAV) while continuing production of the *Lasta* trainer aircraft (*Utva Pančevo*).

Serbia's increased export rates significantly, with *Lazar* 3, *Nora* howitzers, and *ALAS* missiles sold to Middle Eastern, Asian, and African clients. The 2023 *Defense White Paper* emphasizes further development, including new systems like the *Šumadija* MLRS and Srbija air-defense missiles (18km range). By 2025, Serbia aims for near self-sufficiency in armored vehicles, artillery, and ammunition, reducing dependence on imports while boosting its defense-industrial base as a pillar of national security.

2.2.Republic of Croatia: NATO Integration, Modernization, and Strategic Balancing (2014–2025)

By analyzing Croatia, a member of NATO and the European Union, clearly illustration is evident of the differences in military modernization and armament between NATO member states, which align with the organization's obligations, and independent states outside alliances, which do not have strict political constraints.

Croatia's path towards modernization started in the mid-2010s, following a period of post-crisis reducing defense budget. After changing economic policy, due to the geopolitical factors, the Croatian government launched a Long-Term Development Plan for the Armed Forces (2015-2024) to restore military capabilities and meet new security challenges[84]. One key geopolitical factor influencing the shift in military strategy was NATO's commitments following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Since Croatia joined NATO in 2009, it committed to aligning with the organization's obligations. New obligations were set at the NATO Wales Summit in 2014, when the countries pledged to move toward spending 2% of GDP on defense by 2024[85]. Croatia has aligned with NATO targets, including

[84] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia. *The Croatian Armed Forces Long-Term Development Plan 2015–2024*. Zagreb: Ministry of Defence, 2015. https://www.morh.hr/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ltdp_en_2015.pdf.
[85] NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*.

modernization of equipment contributing to collective security. Integrating more closely with NATO's defense systems, such as the Integrated Air and Missile Defense System, became a key focus.

Besides NATO's commitments, Croatia has commitment under the EU Membership obligations. After joining the EU in 2013, Croatia aimed to contribute to European security initiatives. Modernization was one of the essentials to participate in EU common defense projects and international mission. The cooperation was mutual, since the EU was actively offering grants supporting each country's initiatives and capabilities.

According to the theory of Structural realism and Offensive realism, regional security dynamics were affected by unilateral decisions by neighboring countries[86]. Since the buildup of some countries were evident, for examples Serbia's acquiring weapons from Russia in 2014 and 2016, Croatia's leadership insisted on modernization as the response, not an arms race, focused on upgrading outdated Yugoslav-era armaments rather than outmatching any neighbor[87]. However, this focus followed the exact path of modernization that led to increased tension and in the end the arms race. Since the majority of Croatia's inventory dated from the 1990s or even much earlier, many systems became outdated with some systems reaching end-of-life by 2014-2015, such as MiG-21Bis fighters and Soviet-made tanks and helicopters. Modernization of the defense capabilities was needed to maintain readiness, which led to procurement of innovative programs for aircraft, artillery, and vehicles, as well as updates to soldier equipment[88].

In the period between 2014 and 2025, Croatia renovated all branches of its military with new acquisitions and some domestic production. Similar to Serbia's priorities, the foremost priority for Croatia were innovation of Air Forces. Firstly, the Soviet-era MiG-21 fighters had to be changed, and after years of market examination, Croatia signed a deal in May 2021 to buy 12 Dassault *Rafale* F3-R multirole jets from France. This is $1.2 billion deal, which marks the largest ever defense procurement in Croatia, aimed to give Croatia a 4.5-generation fighter capability[89]. This deal represents an alternative of failed attempted deal with Israel on acquiring used F-16s in 2018, however that deal

[86] Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.
[87] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, Long-Term Development Plan 2015–2024.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Dassault Aviation, "Croatia Selects Rafale for Its Air Force," 2021, https://www.dassault-aviation.com/en/group/press/press-kits/croatia-selects-rafale/ (accessed April 10, 2025); Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, "Croatia Signs Rafale Procurement Agreement," 2021, https://www.morh.hr/en/croatian-sky-now-guarded-by-croatian-rafale-jets/ (accessed April 10, 2025)

failed[90]. Secondly, Croatia diversified its helicopter fleet from older Russian models to Western types. U.S. donated 16 Bell OH-58D Kiowa Warrior armed scout helicopter in 2016. Later in 2020, Croatia agreed to buy its first UH-60M Black Hawk transport helicopters, which costed $38 million, considering two others which were donated by the U.S. The initial plan was to build a fleet of 10 Black Hawks, replacing old helicopters[91]. Croatia tried to repair ten outdated Mi-171Sh helicopters in 2019 to extend their service life. However, some of these helicopters were donated to Ukraine after 2022[92]. Upgrading air defense was with delays, yet it started to take shape in following years. The country joined NATO's shared air-defense system and invested a considerable amount to improve its air-surveillance radars and communication tools[93]. Croatia used outdated air defense systems (*Strela*, Igla*)* while exploring modern options like Mistral or NASAMS. It equipped OH-58D helicopters with U.S.-supplied Hellfire missiles, starting deliveries in 2017 (~19.4 million HRK) and completing them by 2020, boosting its anti-tank and support capabilities[94]. Reflecting on armored fighting vehicles, Croatia focuses on improving its mechanized units. In 2020, Croatia got approval to receive seventy-six refurbished M2A2 Bradleys from the U.S., armed with 25 mm guns and TOW missiles. A Croatian firm, *Đuro Đaković*, will modernize them[95]. Regarding tanks, Croatia upgraded old M-84A tanks but has not bought new ones since 2014. Unlike Serbia and other regional countries without navies, Croatia's navy stands out as a leader in the area. The Navy upgraded to missile boats in 2016 and began building five *Omiš*-class patrol boats, starting with one in 2018[96]. The Navy fixed its RBS-15 anti-ship missiles in 2016 and got two U.S. REMUS 100 underwater drones in 2016 ($1.7 million) for mine detection[97].

[90] Defense News, "U.S. Blocks Israeli Sale of F-16s to Croatia," January 8, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/01/08/us-blocks-israeli-sale-of-f-16s-to-croatia/ (accessed April 9, 2025).
[91] U.S. Embassy Zagreb, "Black Hawk Helicopters Delivered to Croatian Armed Forces," 2020, https://hr.usembassy.gov/black-hawk-helicopters-delivered-to-croatian-armed-forces/ (accessed April 10, 2025).
[92] Ukrinform, "Croatia Donates Mi-8 Helicopters to Ukraine," 2023, https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3776256-croatia-donates-mi8-helicopters-to-ukraine.html (accessed April 11, 2025).
[93] NATO Allied Air Command, "Croatia Determined to Continue Contributing to Safeguarding NATO Airspace," 2020, https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2020/croatia-determined-to-continue-contributing-to-safeguarding-nato-airspace (accessed April 10, 2025)
[94] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, "Delivery of Hellfire Missiles from the U.S.," 2018, https://www.morh.hr/en/croatian-armed-forces-receive-hellfire-missiles/ (accessed April 10, 2025).
[95] U.S. Department of Defense, "Croatia Approved for M2A2 Bradley Acquisition," 2020, https://www.defense.gov (accessed April 11, 2025).
[96] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, "Omiš-Class Patrol Boats: Navy Modernization," 2019, https://www.morh.hr (accessed April 10, 2025).
[97] Ministarstvo obrane Republike Hrvatske, "Remus 100 Underwater Vehicles Upgrading the Navy's Countermine Capabilities," *Hrvatski vojnik*, 2016, https://hrvatski-vojnik.hr/the-remus-100-underwater-vehicles-upgrading-the-navy-s-countermine-capabilities/ (accessed May 16, 2025).

Reflecting on defense spending, Croatia increased its defense budget after 2014 to support modernization, which aligns with the aims and guidelines provided at the NATO's Wales summit. During 2014 and 2015, spending was approximately 1.3-1.4% of GDP due to earlier budget cuts[98]. However, increases have been notable from 2016 onward, in accordance with NATO targets. In 2016, the defense budget was approximately $837 million, equal to 1.62% of GDP. Smaller changes occurred in the period between 2016 and 2020, with 2020 emphasizing increased defense spending, despite the pandemic's economic impact, reaching $1.03 billion (1.80% of GDP)[99]. In 2021, Croatia's defense budget reached about $1.85 billion, reaching nearly 2.79% of GDP. This significant increase was possible due to one-time costs, like payments for *Rafale* fighter jets, and a new way of evaluating the budget[100]. Without these special expenses, spending was closer to 1.8% of GDP, still below NATO's 2% target[101]. From 2022 to 2025, Croatia aimed to keep defense spending near 2% of GDP[102]. Overall, from 2014 to 2025, Croatia's defense budget nearly doubled, showing its effort to modernize the military and take on more NATO duties[103]. The Ministry of Defense reported steady increases in spending on equipment and facilities from 2016 to 2021[104].

Croatia's defense industry has been heavily influenced by comprehensive international partnership, reflective the country's Western-oriented security policy. As a NATO member, Croatia shapes its defense changes to align with the alliance's regulations. Modernization follows NATO's aims and teamwork plans, ensuring Croatian troops can collaborate with allies. Croatia actively deploys its soldiers to NATO missions, for example in Kosovo, and hosts training exercises, which forces it to improve gear and skills[105]. It focuses on NATO-compatible systems, such as air surveillance and command tools[106]. In return, NATO offers expertise and some funds for standardizing equipment. This led Croatia to choose Western planes and communication systems to meet alliance standards. Besides NATO membership, Croatia participates in European Union's programs due to its membership status.

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[98] NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries* (2014–2024), 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf (accessed April 11, 2025).
[99] Ibid.
[100] China-CEE Institute, Croatia External Relations Briefing: Defense Spending in Croatia and New Investments Planned for the Upcoming Years, 2025, https://china-cee.eu/2025/02/17/croatia-external-relations-briefing-defense-spending-in-croatia-and-new-investments-planned-for-the-upcoming-years/ (accessed April 12, 2025).
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries* (2014–2024).
[104] China-CEE Institute*, Croatia External Relations Briefing*.
[105]Euronews, "Croatia Joins NATO Troops in Kosovo Drills amid Tensions," 2025, https://www.euronews.com/2025/03/15/croatia-joins-nato-troops-in-kosovo-drills (accessed April 12, 2025).
[106] NATO, "NATO and Croatia," 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48893.htm (accessed April 12, 2025).

The Croatia's foremost strategic partner in defense is the U.S. American support has been crucial for Croatia's modernization, especially regarding equipment donation. The U.S. provided excess military equipment worth tens of millions of dollars, often via the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and Excess Defense Articles (EDA) programs. Moreover, Croatian and U.S. forces regularly train together, with U.S. guidance in adoption of Western tactics[107].

Besides ties with U.S., Croatia has strong ties with Turkey, a NATO ally, which have gained importance recently, especially in defense industry cooperation. In period between 2022 and 2023, Croatia opened negotiations to acquire Turkish *Bayraktar TB2* drones to strengthen its reconnaissance and strike capabilities[108]. This followed the example of other European countries and was partly motivated by the evolving regional balance (Turkey is a major drone supplier, including to some of Croatia's neighbors). While no large Turkish arms purchases were completed as of 2025, the dialogue reflects Croatia's interest in diversifying suppliers. Aside from hardware, Croatian and Turkish forces interact in NATO exercises and share experiences from peacekeeping missions (for example, both contributed to KFOR in Kosovo)[109].

Croatia's defense relations with Russia were notable in the 2000s, yet after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Croatia cooled relations with Russia due to the NATO's alignment of foreign policies. Especially after joining NATO/EU, it gradually started reducing dependence on Russian arms. The Croatian military still operates some system with Soviet-legacy (Mi-8/17 helicopters, Strela missiles, etc.), which created a maintenance dilemma – since traditionally Russia (or Ukraine) would service these. Notably, a 2014 contract to repair Croatia's MiG-21 fighters was done via Ukraine, but poor results there emphasized the need to switch to Western suppliers. By opting for Western aircraft and phasing out old Soviet equipment, Croatia has essentially ended any substantial defense procurement from Russia. In contrast, Russia's arming of Serbia (including donations of MiG-29s, T-72 tanks, and the Pantsir-S1 air defense system) has been viewed with concern in Zagreb, though Croatia's official line is to avoid direct confrontation[110].

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[107] U.S. Department of Defense, "Bradleys Ready to Roll in Croatia," U.S. Army, February 7, 2023, https://www.army.mil/article/280463/bradleys_ready_to_roll_in_croatia (accessed April 12, 2025).
[108] Turkish Journal, "Croatia Eyes Bayraktar Drones amid Shifting Regional Security," 2025, https://www.turkishjournal.com/croatia-bayraktar-drones-europe-nato-2025/ (accessed April 12, 2025).
[109] Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkey–Croatia Relations," n.d., https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-croatia.en.mfa (accessed April 12, 2025).
[110] AP News, "Croatian Officials Welcome the Arrival of Rafale Fighter Jets Purchased from France," 2024, https://apnews.com/article/4e351e333e0e3cc31cd60df380a74672 (accessed April 12, 2025).

Croatia's defense industry has changed since its Yugoslav days, moving from large factories to a smaller, more focused sector. Since 2014, it has grown in specific areas of military production. During the period of Yugoslavia, Croatia was home to significant defense factories, widely known the Đuro Đaković in *Slavonski Brod*, specialized for tank and other armored vehicles production. *Kraljevica* in Split for naval vessels production. After Croatia gained independence in 1991, with war damages and the loss of the Yugoslav market hurt many defense industries. Some switched to civilian products. By the 2000s, only a few companies stayed in defense, making specialized items or assembling under licenses. Croatia's defense industry has grown due to regional competition and new military purchases. The government pushes local companies to be part of contracts. Croatia shines in light weapons. HS Produkt in *Karlovac* makes the VHS-2 rifle, adopted by the army in the late 2010s to replace old weapons[111]. They also supply HS-9 pistols, used locally, and sold worldwide. Šestan-Busch makes combat helmets, delivering over 1,000 to the military in 2017, and exports globally[112]. Local companies also maintain and upgrade equipment. Zagreb's Aviation Technical Center fixes aircraft and helicopters, like the Mi-171Sh in the period between 2017 and 2019[113]. *Đuro Đaković* upgrades vehicles, and Split's *Pomorski Centar* updates ship radars[114]. These efforts use local skills to keep equipment ready, mixing old Yugoslav know-how with Western partnerships. The regional arms race, especially Serbia's defense growth, pushes Croatia to invest at home. Unlike Serbia, which kept more heavy industry, Croatia focuses on self-reliance in small arms and gear to avoid depending on foreign suppliers. In the late 2010s, the Ministry of Defense signed big deals with local firms for supplies, ensuring fast, tailored solutions. Instead of building complex systems like drones, Croatia seeks partnerships with companies like Turkey's *Baykar* or Western firms for future projects.

Since the theory of neorealism explains the regional dynamics both for procurement of innovative technologies and foreign partnerships, it has been quite challenging to evaluate whether Croatia's following Serbian actions, or vice versa. However, it was evident in 2017 that Croatia redoubled efforts to acquire Western jets, after Serbia has received donations of MiG-29 fighters from Russia. Nevertheless, NATO's enlargement and Croatia's alignment forced Serbia to find ways to respond to regional threats. Since the military buildups are not quite equivalent, the comparison can be

[111] HS Produkt, "VHS-K2 cal 5.56x45," n.d., https://www.hs-produkt.hr/military-led/vhs-k2 (accessed April 12, 2025).
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, "Omiš-Class Patrol Boats: *Navy Modernization*," 2019, https://www.morh.hr (accessed April 10, 2025).
[114] Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia, *Croatian Defence Industry 2017*, 2017, https://www.morh.hr/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/cdi_2017_w.pdf (accessed April 10, 2025).

made comparing quantitative and qualitative modernization. In this case, it is evident that Serbia has been pushing towards quantity, and Croatia pushing towards quality.

2.3.Bosnia and Herzegovina: National Security and Defense (2014-2025)

Bosnia and Herzegovina is the country characterized by intensified ethnic divisions, affected by the war legacy of 1990s, where peace efforts largely failed, with temporary solution failing in recent years. During the war there were many solutions for the war settlements, but since the EC and US recognized Bosnia independence, despite Serb opposition, it intensified ethnic division. UN and EC peace efforts failed, pushing NATO to intervene, creating a destabilizing momentum leading to Dayton negotiations. Although Dayton Peace Agreement signed in 1995 ended hostilities, ensured military disengagement, refugee return and established international peacekeeping (IFOR under NATO), it created a highly decentralized political structure with two entities: Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosniaks & Croats) and *Republika Srpska* (Serbs). Moreover, it established ethnic power-sharing institutions in order to maintain balance among three main ethnic groups. In result, Dayton agreement enhanced ethnic division, with no actual state functionality, which lead to enabling national politics. Equivalent to interference during the Dayton agreement, some external actors continued to shape the post-war agenda, failing to account for the complex reality region was facing. Nevertheless, the agreement represents a realistic compromise among warring parties. However, it became evident that reforms are highly needed, especially ones that must carefully balance government improvements without undermining peace or reigniting conflict[115].

Regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina's defense development, over the past decade it has been characterized by strategic stagnation and minimal military modernization. Moreover, it heavily relied on international security guarantees. In comparison, Serbia and Croatia have clear military strategies and ongoing procurement strategies, while BiH struggles to formulate specific national defense strategy due to the post-war ethnic division[116]. Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex three-part government and

[115]Srđan Davidović, "Dayton Legacy – 25 Years of Building Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *The Review of International Affairs 71*, no. 1179 (2020): 1–20. Published by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade.
[116] Balkan Defence Monitor, *Balkan Defence Monitor: Security and Defence Trends in the Western Balkans* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2022), 4, https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Balkan-Defence-Monitor.pdf (accessed April 15, 2025).

power-sharing system often block security policy development, leaving the Armed Forces underfunded and the country's strategy unclear.

Since the BiH did not have unified military after the breakup of Yugoslavia, the decision undertaken in 2005 to unify former warring faction armies into a single state-level Armed Forces was crucial for advancing defense reform. This reform was later codified in the 2005 Law on Defense, which made NATO membership an official objective under Article 84, requiring all government bodies to work toward Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the alliance[117]. Nonetheless, in the period between 2014 and 2025 BiH failed to update its security and defense strategies, it set it apart from the rest of the Western Balkans. While neighboring countries revised their strategies in recent years, BiH's National security Strategy and Defense Strategy have remained the same since 2008[118]. Bosnia's outdated defense strategy stems from political deadlock, with ethnic divisions blocking key decisions like NATO integration. While Bosniak and Croat leaders support Euro-Atlantic ties, *Republika Srpska* Serb leadership strongly opposes NATO, stalling reforms. Although some technical planning documents have been formulated in recent years with assistance from NATO advisors, with BiH completing Defense Review and drafting a 2017-2027 Modernization Plan for Armed Forces, implementation remained unfulfilled[119]. These documents required equipment upgrades, professionalization, and stockpile reduction, yet by 2024, NATO reports stated that just 4% of modernization projects were completed, with no implementation for the Defense Review[120].

In terms of BiH's defense spending, it has remained the lowest in the region. Throughout 2014 and 2025, military expenditure remained approximately around or below 1% of GDP, e.g., in 2021 it was only 0.78% of GDP. Particularly, BiH Parliamentary Assembly has repeatedly failed to pass the state budget on time. Since 2008, budget approvals have been consistently delayed, with the 2021-2022 fiscal year seeing no adopted budget due to the political crisis[121]. The government applied temporary financing using prior-year's allocations, harshly impacting military operations. For example, the Ministry of Defense was unable to spend a significant portion of its allocations, which resulted in

[117] DTT-NET, "The Important and Unfinished Work of Defense Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina," 2023, https://dtt-net.com/opinion-the-important-and-unfinished-work-of-defense-reform-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/ (accessed April 15, 2025).
[118] Balkan Defence Monitor, *Balkan Defence Monitor: Security and Defence Trends in the Western Balkans* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2022), 4–5.
[119] DTT-NET, "The Important and Unfinished Work of Defense Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina."
[120] Ibid.
[121] Balkan Defence Monitor, *Balkan Defence Monitor: Security and Defence Trends in the Western Balkans*, 10.

losing an estimated 30 million KM of unexecuted funds in 2023, due to the delays in finalizing procurement approvals[122]. Additionally, almost 90% of the defense budget consistently goes to personnel costs, leaving only under 5% for equipment and modernization[123]. This is the direct outcome of the political crisis. Analysis of nominal expenditures shows near-identical defense budgets annually since 2017. It is important to emphasize that BiH's budget process is extraordinarily complex, as the state depends on entity contributions. The Federation of BiH and *Republika Srpska* (RS) have their own entity budgets and revenue, which then feed into the state-level budget for defense and other institutions. RS leadership, particularly under Milorad Dodik, has systematically been blocking budget increases to weaken state military institutions. However, the same mechanism has been used by counterparts. This explains why the Bosnia's military stagnation has continued post-2014, even as regional security threats evolved.

Taking this into account, the modernization of BiH's armed forces in the period of 2014 to 2025 has been highly limited. The BiH's army (*AFBiH*) remains dependent on outdated equipment from Yugoslav era, including outdated artillery, transport vehicles, and small arms. Its minimal air capability consists of a few utility helicopters without combat aircraft[124]. While the 2017-2027 Modernization Plan proposed crucial upgrades—modern helicopters, infantry weapons, and communications systems—nearly all procurement initiatives remained unrealized by 2025 due to funding insufficiencies and political deadlock. Limited successes regarding military innovation have been noted in aviation, mostly due to the U.S. funded European Recapitalization Incentive Program (*ERIP*). Through this program, BiH acquired four Bell UH-1H-II helicopters, replacing Soviet-era ones. This $38.5 million project demonstrated Bosnia's capacity for targeted upgrades with external support.

However, broader modernization remains stagnant, since ground forces still rely on stored T-55/M-84 tanks, air defense on SA-7 MANPADS, infantry on refurbished AK variants, and with no clear progress on drones, modern AT/AD systems, or armored vehicles. The domestic defense industry focuses on exports rather than equipping national forces. While Bosnia remains a small arms exporter, its military uses primarily donated weapons[125].

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[122] DTT-NET, "Defense Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
[123] Balkan Defence Monitor, Security and Defence Trends, 10.
[124] DTT-NET, "Defense Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
[125] Balkan Insight, "Bosnia Aims to Destroy Old Munitions in Two Years," November 6, 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/06/bosnia-aims-to-destroy-old-munitions-in-two-years-11-05-2018/ (accessed April 15, 2025).

Bosnia represents one of the few countries in the region that has made some progress regarding the demilitarization process. Mostly, it has been done through EXPLODE+ (UNDP/OSCE), reducing Cold War-era stockpiles from 38,000 tons to 8,000 tons (2006-2018)[126]. Moreover, Bosnia has been actively participating in international deployment, supporting peacekeeping missions in various regions and countries (e.g., Afghanistan, South Sudan, Cyprus), developing professional cadres through NATO/UN missions[127].

Officially, Serbia respects Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and the Dayton Agreement, but it maintains a special relationship with *Republika Srpska*. Belgrade's national security strategy (2020) explicitly states that "preservation of the *Republika Srpska*" is a priority of Serbian foreign policy and warns that attempts to change the Dayton framework threaten regional stability[128]. Serbia's leadership, especially President *Aleksandar Vučić*, has repeated that any "*abolition*" of RS or reduction of its autonomy would be unacceptable. Belgrade's strategy notes that attempts to change Dayton (e.g., centralize BiH) negatively affect security, implying Serbia might respond to protect the Serb entity. Meanwhile, Croatia's 2017 National Security Strategy explicitly pledges to "resolutely advocate" for the rights and equality of Croats in BiH, noting that electoral changes since 2000 have undermined Bosnian Croats' status. As is evident, Bosnia has become a country for external actors, which influence diminishes regional security. In essence, BiH's weakness has become a crucial factor in the region's security calculations, even though BiH itself is not increasing its military strength.

2.4.Albania's National Security and Defense Capability (2014–2025)

In the Western Balkans, Albania is another example of the country whose security policy is primarily influenced by its membership in a military bloc. Its security strategy has undergone a significant evolution since joining NATO in 2009. Reinforcing its Euro-Atlantic orientation, Albanian's government updated national security goals by adopting new National Security Strategy in 2014[129].

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[126] Ibid.
[127] International Peace Institute, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Peacekeeping Contributor Profile* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2020), https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/ipi-pub-ppp-BosniaHerzegovina.pdf (accessed April 15, 2025).
[128] Balkan Defence Monitor, *Security and Defence Trends*, 16.; Republic of Serbia, *Strategija nacionalne bezbednosti*, 2020.
[129] Balkan Defence Monitor, "Albania's National Interests and Security Policy," 2024, https://balkandefencemonitor.com/category/albania/ (accessed April 16, 2025).

Within the new security strategy, Albania has defined key threats, such as organized crime, corruption, terrorism, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. However, according to its priorities, Albania continues to maintain "a small, efficient and professional force," mostly focused on personnel quality over heavy weaponry[130]. Membership in NATO is often seen by Albania as a security guarantee, and the country is committed to fulfilling Alliance obligations and contributing to regional stability through good relations with neighboring countries.

Albania periodically updated its strategic documents in order to address emerging challenges in the period between 2014 and 2025. New domains concerning security threats, such as cyber defense and hybrid threats, have been confirmed within the new National Defense Strategy issued in 2020. In recent years, Albania has been implementing Cyber Defense Strategies to strengthen cyber capabilities preventing cyber incidents and strengthen resilience[131]. Especially, concerning a major cyberattacked Albania suffered in 2022, it started intensifying cybersecurity upgrades, aligning with NATO's collective defense principles and responsive to new threats (from terrorism to cyber warfare)[132].

Albanian's defense expenditure increased significantly from 2014 to 2025, reflecting both economic growth and a political commitment to meet NATO's targets. In the initial years after the annexation of Crimea, Albania due to the economic deficiencies was not able to increase military spending in order to align with the NATO's targets, since the GDP on defense were approximately 1.1-1.3%. Yet, in the succeeding years, Albania has increased defense budget from $150 million in 2014 to $223 million by 2021[133]. After the War in Ukraine renewed its potential with NATO's call for readiness, Albania's military spending nearly doubled, comparing the 2014's numbers, reaching 2.03% of GDP by 2024 (European Western Balkans, 2024; NATO, 2024). Albania (along with North Macedonia) was one of the first Western Balkan NATO members to hit the 2% target[134]. Moreover, Albania has adopted regulations to adjust the budget composition in order to prioritize modernization. According to the NATO guidelines, approximately 20% of defense spending was in the direction of equipment procurement and upgrades (European Western Balkans, 2024). Hence, defense budgets for 2023 and

[130] Ibid.
[131] Ministry of Defence of Albania, "Security Policies and Strategies of the Ministry of Defence," 2024, https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/security-policies/strategies-of-mod (accessed April 16, 2025).
[132] Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), AA22-264A: *Iranian State Actors Conduct Cyber Operations Against the Government of Albania*, 2022, https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa22-264a (accessed April 16, 2025).
[133] NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries* (*2014–2023*), 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf (accessed April 16, 2025).
[134] Ibid.

2024 saw some of the largest year-on-year increases (around 15-20% of the decade)[135]. Since joining NATO, Albania has taken multiple steps to upgrade outdated military equipment to meet NATO's standards. Especially, it was crucial to replace outdated Soviet-era weaponry with modern NATO-compatible systems. Majority of these systems were acquired through U.S. military aid programs.

In initial years of modernization, fighter jets lacked upgrades, but Albania has strengthened its air capabilities through NATO cooperation and through helicopters acquisitions. Major acquisitions for Albania in 2024 were UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, combined with French AS532 Cougars and Italian AB-212s for transport and disaster response. However, the biggest advancement was investing in air surveillance and infrastructure in cooperation with NATO. A major project was the €50M upgrade of *Kuçovë* Air Base in central Albania[136]. *Kuçovë* is used for hosting Alliance aircrafts for exercises or operations. Additionally, Albania has even offered the base for use by Kosovo's security force[137].

Albania upgraded its small navy with NATO-compatible vessels, replacing Soviet-era patrol boats. Key developments are 4 Damen 4207-class patrol boats for offshore operations, Italy's 2024 donation of the Libra patrol ship, for surveillance and rescue missions, and refurbished *Pashaliman* naval base, modernized with Turkish support. Since the Albanian capacity is expanded, and due to the strategic position, now Albania can participate in NATO maritime mission in the Adriatic and Mediterranean[138].

Since Albania has recognized cyber defense as an essential part of its national security, the government adopted cyber strategies and started modernizing cyber defense units[139]. NATO's support was crucial for Albanian's advancement, since the NATO experts are supporting Albania in hardening critical infrastructure. Albania had created a National Cyber Security Centre in 2024, and it was investing in cyber incident response capabilities, aligning with NATO's cyber initiatives[140].

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[135] Ibid.
[136] The Defense Post, "Albania Looks to Restart Weapons Plants with Foreign Help," 2024, https://thedefensepost.com/2024/04/19/albania-weapon-plants/ (accessed April 16, 2025).
[137] The Western Balkans, "New Military Alliances Split the Balkans," 2023, https://thewesternbalkans.com/new-military-alliances-split-the-balkans/ (accessed April 16, 2025).
[138] AP News, "Albania Receives Naval Ship Donation from Italy amid Migrant Concerns," 2023, https://apnews.com/article/albania-italy-naval-ship-donation-migrants-a0f5785a1e49b9fb3636f1084a3cc118 (accessed April 16, 2025).
[139] Ministry of Defence of Albania, "Security Policies and Strategies."
[140] Ibid.

Historically, Albania has particularly close defense relations with *Kosovo. Tirana has been crucial actor in *Kosovo's pursuit of independence, since both Albani and *Kosovo's authorities share strategic outlook on defense matters. In recent years, Tirana and Pristina signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement to coordinate responses to threats[141]. The Albanian Armed Forces have mutual agreement with *Kosovo's Security Force (KSF) on trainings and educating members of KSF. Moreover, annually Albania and KSF hold joint drills in order to build *Kosovo's capabilities. In 2022 Albania signed a deal with *Kosovo, allowing their forces to use newly opened *Kuçovë* airbase for training once it becomes operational[142]. Albania went beyond ordinary cooperation and signed a trilateral defense cooperation declaration with Croatia and *Kosovo in March 2025, aimed at strengthening their military interoperability, defense industry ties, and joint response to hybrid threats. Despite Serbia's disapproval, Albanian official stated that it is not a threat to anyone, but just a message for other nations that these three nations are united in facing any danger aimed at destabilizing the region[143]. This clearly reflects Albanian's strategy to build alliances with NATO-aligned Balkan states.

Albanian defense industry has been inactive since the 1990s, but in recent years it underwent significant changes. The crucial change occurred in transforming old communist-era arms factories (e.g., *Poliçan*, *Gramsh*), due to the decline in production during the post-Cold War era. By the 2015, Albania managed to restart production, inviting foreign investors to assess sites like like *Poliçan* (ammunition) and *Gramsh* (small arms)[144]. NATO supported initiatives by Albania, and by 2024, Albania prioritized ammunition and light weapons production to meet global demand. Potential Turkish/Western partnerships—mirroring *Kosovo's Turkish-backed ammunition project—could position Albania as a regional defense supplier. However, rebuilding the domestic industry in examined period depended on foreign military assistance. According to the findings, the primary provider is the United States, with the highest donations, both with resources and equipment. Yet Turkey emerged as another key partner by equipping Albania with modern technology and academy reconstruction. European NATO members also contributed to Albanian's defense modernization. For instance, Italy donated patrol vessels, provided naval/air force training. France enhanced air surveillance, while UK and Germany assisted in officer education. Regional partner like Croatia shared reform experience and

[141] The Western Balkans, "New Military Alliances Split the Balkans."
[142] Ibid.
[143] European Western Balkans, "What Is the Aim of the Declaration on Military Cooperation Between Croatia, Albania and Kosovo?" 2025, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/03/24/what-is-the-aim-of-the-declaration-on-military-cooperation-between-croatia-albania-and-kosovo/ (accessed April 16, 2025).
[144] The Defense Post, "Albania Looks to Restart Weapons Plants."

donated equipment. All these cooperation resulted in Albania transition from aid recipient to contributor, which became evident when Albania donated armored vehicle to Ukraine in 2022[145].

2.5.North Macedonia: NATO Accession, Defense modernization, and Regional Security (2014-2025)

North Macedonia, similar to many countries in the region, was pursuing NATO membership, yet it faced a decade-long process to achieve it. The result of the process was a success in 2020; after resolving dispute with Greece through Prespa Agreement in 2018, the country received a NATO accession invitation and completed all ratifications by March 2020[146]. The membership was supposed to guarantee the country's security in the region, considering many aspirations from a neighboring country. That was a strategic goal of North Macedonia since independence in 1991. Similarly, the integration process requires aligning the country's military standards with NATO norms. However, it is worth mentioning, that North Macedonia had been active in NATO's Partnership for Peace since 1995 and contributed to many alliance operations – for instance, deploying troops in Afghanistan from 2002 until 2014[147]. Moreover, the country supported NATO's KFOR mission by providing logical assistance during the Kosovo conflict. All actions undertaken contributed to full commitment to NATO standards and principles, which resulted in admission. Allies treated North Macedonia as an important force for political and economic stability in the region after completing integration into NATO structures by 2024. North Macedonia represents a country in the region where its defense posture was affected by the membership within alliance, underscoring how membership strengthened both national securities, and overall, the Western Balkans' deterrence posture.

In the examined period from 2014 to 2025, North Macedonia updated its defense and security doctrine to meet Euro-Atlantic Standards. The security environment and reforms needed for NATO membership were assessed by a document completed and adopted in 2018, named Strategic Defense Review[148]. Based on the Strategic Defense Review, North Macedonia adopted a National Defense

[145] Espreso TV, "Albania Transfers Armored Vehicles to Ukrainian Army," 2022, https://global.espreso.tv/albania-transfers-armored-vehicles-to-ukrainian-army (accessed April 16, 2025).
[146] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "North Macedonia Officially Joins NATO," 2020, https://www.rferl.org/a/north-macedonia-officially-joins-nato/30513509.html (accessed April 21, 2025).
[147] European Western Balkans, "North Macedonia's NATO Membership: Decades-Long Ambition Finally Becomes a Reality," March 26, 2020, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/26/north-macedonias-nato-membership-decades-long-ambition-finally-becomes-a-reality/ (accessed April 21, 2025).
[148] Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, *Strategic Defence Review,* 2018, https://mod.gov.mk/storage/2021/06/SDR-Paper-dated-05-July-2018.pdf (accessed April 21, 2025).

Strategy in 2020 to guide its army and defense institutions in the NATO era. This newly adopted document emphasizes territorial defense, collective security, and interoperability with NATO forces[149]. Non-traditional threats were also introduced, emphasizing emerging technologies. The Ministry of Defense worked with the Ministry of Interior and other national agencies to draft a National Cyber Security Strategy by 2020, recognizing cyber defense as a growing priority for the country[150]. It marked a transition from outdated Yugoslav-era defense structure to a modern, professional force adjusted toward international missions and national resilience. Comparing to other countries in the region, North Macedonia was mostly focused on broader regional security, shifting focus to collective defense and regional cooperation, unlike, for instance Serbia and Croatia. Summarizing Doctrinal developments, it is evident that throughout the period examined, focusing on SDR 2018 and the 2020 Defense Strategy, the country initiated doctrinal reforms that secured countries pro-Western, NATO orientation, prioritize modernization, and addressed emerging security challenges like cyber threats and hybrid warfare.

North Macedonia's defense spending has been increasing constantly from 2014 to 2024. In the initial years of examined period it was about 1.09% of GDP ($106 million), when later in 2024 it was 2.22% of GDP ($263 million), especially after committing NATO's targets in 2017[151]. Due to fiscal constraints and domestic political turmoil, spending decreased to approximately 0.9% of GDP in 2015 and remained around same values by 2017 (about $101 million), which was one of the lowest in the regions. However, after the countries reform followed by the government change in 2017 and renewed political orientation towards NATO accession, the defense expenditure began to rise. In 2018 the increase was evident, "jumped" by 30%, which was one of the largest year-to-year increase globally[152]. This was due to the government's determination to align with the NATO's guidelines set on the summit in Wales in 2014, reaching 2% of GDP by 2024. Especially after the country received NATO's admission in 2020, the trend continued. In 2021 defense expenditure reached over $220 million. The peak after the gaining independence was approximately 1.6% of GDP, and that peak was reached again

[149] Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, *Defence Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia*, 2020, 3, https://mod.gov.mk/storage/2021/06/Defence-Strategy-of-the-Republic-of-North-Macedonia.pdf (accessed April 21, 2025).
[150] Government of North Macedonia, *National Cyber Security Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia 2018–2022*, 2018, https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res//treaties/strategies/macedonia_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of/mkd0002s_html/ap_cybersec_v1.13_eng.pdf (accessed April 21, 2025).
[151] Countryeconomy.com, "Republic of Macedonia – Government Defence Expenditure," 2024, https://countryeconomy.com/government/expenditure/defence/macedonia (accessed April 21, 2025).
[152] Transparency International Defence & Security, *Government Defence Integrity Index: North Macedonia*, 2020, https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/11/North-Macedonia_GDI-2020-Brief.pdf (accessed April 21, 2025).

in 2022, especially due to the global tensions after the Ukrainian conflict renewed its potential. The government confirmed its commitment to reach 2% by 2024, supported by a national consensus on boosting defense outlays[153]. The government announced plans in 2023 to increase the defense budget from $317 million in 2022 to around $540 million by 2027 in order to replace outdated technology and equipment[154]. This demonstrated North Macedonia's effort to transform defense capabilities regardless of relatively small economy.

The country's commitment to increase budget was crucial for pursuing military modernization, and reaching goals set for the future in the doctrinal documents. This ambitious military modernization was together with higher budgets in the region, yet it was significantly supported by NATO allies (especially United States and Turkey), and European partners. Primary goal was to replace outdated Soviet-era arms with equipment according to the NATO standards. The crucial step was undertaken in 2022, when North Macedonia retired and donated its entire fleet of third-generation T-72 main battle tanks to Ukraine, as it planned to modernize its own military according to the NATO standards[155]. Additionally, thirty tanks were transferred, and following the same paths, the country replaced four Su-25 ground attack aircraft, which remained of a 2001 purchase[156]. By replacing this legacy of outdated equipment, the country signaled significant shift toward more reliable and mobile forces. Reasonably, the modernization plan has focused on mobility, firepower, and interoperability upgrades. These vehicles of Oshkosh production are equipped with remote weapon stations and communications gear, which improves army's mobility and are fully interoperable with U.S. and NATO forces[157]. Besides standard procurement, North Macedonia has received many donations of equipment, mostly from NATO member states. Turkey has been a crucial partner, especially in providing rifles, vehicles, and other supplies to modernize country's forces. The EU also contributed, both through NATO trust funds

[153] NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "North Macedonia's NATO Contributions, Deterrence and Defence & Support to Ukraine in Focus," 2025, https://www.nato-pa.int/news/north-macedonias-nato-contributions-deterrence-and-defence-support-ukraine-focus (accessed April 21, 2025).
[154] Army Technology, "North Macedonia Sets Out Plans to Increase Its Defence Budget," 2023, https://www.army-technology.com/features/north-macedonia-sets-out-plans-to-increase-its-defence-budget/ (accessed April 21, 2025).
[155] Reuters, "North Macedonia Donates Tanks to Ukraine as It Modernises Own Military," July 29, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nmacedonia-donates-tanks-ukraine-it-modernises-own-military-2022-07-29/ (accessed April 21, 2025).
[156] Balkan Insight, "North Macedonia Green-Lights Helicopter Donation to Ukraine," March 30, 2023, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/30/north-macedonia-green-lights-helicopter-donation-to-ukraine/ (accessed April 21, 2025).
[157] Andrew Salerno-Garthwaite, "US Green Lights JLTV Sale to North Macedonia," *Army Technology*, September 1, 2023, https://www.army-technology.com/news/us-greenlights-jltv-sale-to-north-macedonia/ (accessed April 21, 2025).

and bilateral aid. For instance, the U.S. and EU countries jointly provided $139 million in assistance by 2023 to help North Macedonia purchase new, modernized equipment to replace outdated[158].

Principle areas for military modernization for North Macedonia were air mobility and surveillance. Similar to Serbia, the Defense Ministry announced plans to acquire Western-manufactured multi-purpose helicopters by 2024 to replace its aging Mi-24 attack helicopters (12 were acquired in 2001 from Ukraine, and most of which are being retired and some donated to Ukraine)[159]. Newly acquired helicopters have dual roles, both can serve military and have civil protection role. As for air defense and surveillance, the country relies on NATO integration (e.g., the NATO Integrated Air Defense System) rather than purchasing expensive high-end systems of its own, since the country can face budgetary limits. Areas of focus where the country were investing were communications, cyber defense, and logistics infrastructure. For instance, one of the regional military training centers that were modernized was the *Krivolak* Military Training Center for NATO exercises, enabling North Macedonia to host multinational drills and training events in the Western Balkans, since it is one of the biggest military centers in Southeast Europe. Overall, the period between 2014 and 2025 witnessed significant transition of North Macedonia's army from outdated, Yugoslav era equipment, mostly Warsaw Pact-origin equipment to modern one supplied by or financed through its NATO partners. This transformation has not finished, yet it is crucial, since it has greatly improved the army's compatibility with allies and its operational capabilities, despite lack of large domestic defense industry.

Since the history of North Macedonia's participation to international peacekeeping missions has been evident, a practice of it maintained and expanded after 2020. North Macedonia had been contributing to mission in Afghanistan for nearly two decades alongside NATO allies, deploying military contingents to ISAF, the country demonstrated willingness to share global security goals. In mission in *Kosovo, North Macedonia took its role as an active participant in cooperative security initiatives, especially during NATO's 1999 aggression, by allowing NATO forces to use its territory and provide logistical support[160]. Its troops remained in *Kosovo supporting KFOR mission. Additionally, it supported stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina by contributing staff to EUFOR Althea. North Macedonian peacekeepers and police have also joined UN-led missions in Lebanon and Africa in small numbers, aligning with the country's image as a net contributor to international peace and security.

[158] Balkan Insight, "Helicopter Donation to Ukraine."
[159] Ibid.
[160] European Western Balkans, "North Macedonia's NATO Membership."

Regionally, the country is supporting initiatives promoting regional security and cooperation. Strategically, North Macedonia is a member of regional defense forums such as the US-Adriatic Charter (with Croatia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro), participating in joint exercises. One of the biggest joint military drills held in North Macedonia was "*Decisive Strike*" at the *Krivolak* training facility in June 2019, involving NATO allies and other partners, aiming at improving interoperability and readiness[161]. One of the major obstacles with neighboring countries was with Greece, but after resolving the dispute, Skopje began new bilateral military cooperation with Athens – including airspace monitoring arrangements and joint training. Yet, the major cooperation remained with the U.S and Turkey, with frequent military training programs, joint exercises, and education exchanges. By 2024, North Macedonia was participating in NATO's collective defense activities such as deterrence on the Alliance's eastern flank – for example, sending a contingent of troops to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia and joining rotational exercises in Eastern Europe (a reflection of solidarity after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022). Furthermore, North Macedonia has worked closely with fellow Western Balkan NATO members (Albania, Montenegro, Croatia, and Slovenia) on regional security initiatives, such as disaster response drills and cyber-security cooperation, under the auspices of NATO and the EU. All these efforts reinforce North Macedonia's profile as a committed ally that not only benefits from but also contributes to NATO missions and regional stability, disproving concerns that a small military might be a mere consumer of security.

The North Macedonia's position in the region is crucial for the regional security, and due to its role, it has been positive in the past decade. Since it lies at a geographic and political crossroads in the Balkans, bordering with NATO and EU members (Greece, Bulgaria), as well as non-member countries (Serbia, Albania), it means its alignment has broader regional impact. By decisively joining NATO, North Macedonia helped extend the zone of security and collective defense further into the Balkans, thereby reducing strategic voids that external powers might exploit. Not NATO covers a significant belt in the region, strengthening deterrence against any potential aggression in the region. The U.S. as a key partner highlighted North Macedonia's stable democracy position within NATO. However, this alignment position creates a tension for some neighboring countries due to the long-lasting territorial disputes (e.g., Albania and Bulgaria). This case demonstrates how alignment with a military alliance can effectively reduce regional tensions and serve as a deterrent. As NATO membership requires

[161] Macedonian Ministry of Defence, "Exercise 'Decisive Strike 19'," 2019, https://mil.mk/exercises/odluchen-udar-19/?lang=en (accessed April 21, 2025)

collective defense (Article 5), any attack on a member state would trigger a unified response from the entire alliance. Furthermore, when disputing countries are all members of the same alliance, the institutional framework creates inherent conflict-resolution mechanisms and strong disincentives for military confrontation. The shared membership thus acts as both a stabilizing factor and a peacekeeping mechanism within the region.

Additionally, North Macedonia's foreign policy of good neighborliness had a stabilizing effect in the region. Resolving disputes with Greece unblocked NATO membership and served as a precedent for diplomacy overcoming long-standing tensions in the Balkans. Skopje's relations with Sofia (Bulgaria) and Belgrade (Serbia) have also remained generally cordial in security matters, avoiding escalations. Internally, North Macedonia's implementation of the *Ohrid Framework Agreement* (which assured minority Albanian rights after the 2001 conflict) has maintained domestic peace, preventing the kind of ethnic instability that could spill over borders. Nevertheless, this may create a tension in the future, assessing aspiration for some political parties promoting idea of "*Great Albania*." Additionally, political parties with Albanians majority are significantly influencing domestic policy in North Macedonia. Yet, In the realm of regional defense cooperation, North Macedonia has been building a reputation as a reliable partner. It engages in joint regional military projects such as the Balkan Medical Task Force (a regional EU/NATO-supported unit for emergency response) and works with neighbors on cross-border security issues (e.g., border control and counter-terrorism coordination) (Balkan Medical Task Force, n.d.).

Despite positive aspects of North Macedonia's modernization and noteworthy progress, the country faced a few challenges in advancing its defense from 2014 to 2024. Firsly, political challenges were crucial, especially in the initial years of examined period. One of the issues that slowed the EU and NATO paths was dispute with Greece. Moreover, domestic political turmoil when the country faced institutional crisis and change of government, delayed modernization. Secondly, another obstacle for modernization was the relatively small economy with significant social needs, the country faces inherent tensions between defense spending and domestic development priorities. Defense expenditure historically remained below 1% of GDP until the late 2010s, reflecting competing demands for education, healthcare, and infrastructure investment. Even after increasing budgets toward NATO's 2% target, resource constraints continue to limit modernization pace, forcing reliance on allied donations for major acquisitions like armored vehicles. This raises long-term questions about sustainable military self-sufficiency.

Another challenge is the limited defense industrial base. The country has minimal domestic arms production. There are no major manufacturers of weapons or vehicles, besides a few small enterprises. This means that the country is dependent on import from foreign suppliers, from rifles to armored vehicles. Moreover, this creates a significant problem when the country depends on the external market, especially in the time of high fluctuations and procurement delays. Another potential concern is the governance and corruption risks since the country has a weak oversight in the defense sector.

One of the processes of North Macedonia's modernization was transitioning from outdated equipment to modernized ones, but this creates a significant gap during transition. Since the country is retiring and donating old equipment, the country is reducing heavy firepower and waits until the replacement arrives. Additionally, North Macedonia has relatively small army (around 8,000 active personnel), which means that each capability area is limited in capacity. In this realm, countries need to prioritize one over another area due to the limitations, for instance, countries have been prioritizing peacekeeping, and some special forces. Moving forward, North Macedonia's key challenge is to continue modernizing and increasing resilience without overstretching its finances or political consensus. The test for the country would be if the country manages to maintain the momentum on defense investments, especially to remain on the same defense expenditure levels around 2% of GDP. Nonetheless, the period 2014–2024 has shown that with clear strategic direction and allied support, North Macedonia can overcome many of these constraints.

2.6.Montenegro's National Security and Defense Strategy (2014-2025)

Montenegro is another example of how small states leverage military bloc alignment to enhance national security. Since the path to NATO membership was crucial for Montenegro, especially as a small post-Yugoslav state, country first joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 2006 and received a Membership Action Plan in 2009[162]. NATO recognized the country's reform progress and opened talks in 2014 to prepare an invitation, with the initiative gained public support. In December 2015 NATO foreign ministers formally invited Montenegro to participate in NATO meetings as an observer. After

[162] Government of Montenegro, *The Fifth Annual National Programme of Montenegro Covering the Period of Intensified and Focused Talks with NATO*, 2014, https://www.gov.me/en/documents/beb959aa-9e9f-459a-b307-a9f80d549048 (accessed April 23, 2025).

parliamentary ratification, Montenegro officially became the 29th NATO member on 5 June 2017, marking a historic shift from national to collective defense[163].

The defense policies and military structures needed to be aligned with Alliance standards after joining NATO. The key principle was commitment to mutual defense and Alliance missions. Montenegro began integrating its forces into NATO command structures and planning. Shortly after, Montenegro placed its airspace under NATO's air policing, relying on Italy and Greece to patrol its skies as it has no fighter jets (that is widespread practice for new members with limited air force). Montenegro started participating in NATO's consultative processes, contributing to strategic discussions. For the post-Yugoslav state, alignment centered the country's security orientation to the Euro-Atlantic sphere, deterring external threats through Article 5 guarantee, despite the complex historical background of the country in the region. Since the country under Milo *Djukanovic's* reign had already proclaimed a Western democratic value, the process of joining NATO confirmed civilizational choice aligning fully with Western democratic values, especially considering challenging security environment after 2014[164].

Over the course of the decade from 2014 to 2024, Montenegro adopted several key documents to reflect new realities. The country adopted its first National Security Strategy and Defense Strategy in 2008. However, realities changed shortly after, especially after 2010s, requiring a change in the foreign and domestic policies. In 2018, the government adopted a new National Security Strategy, replacing the old one[165]. According to the defense minister Predrag Boskovic, this has been done due to the changed security framework and Montenegro's full NATO membership, requiring shift in priorities from an individual to collective defense[166]. The new Security Strategy emphasized new security interests and identified contemporary risks and threats, pointing out that national security was interdependent with

[163] Government of Montenegro, "Development of Relations Between Montenegro and NATO: Key Dates," 2023, https://www.gov.me/en/article/development-of-relations-between-montenegro-and-nato-key-dates (accessed April 23, 2025).
[164] Government of Montenegro, "Minister Bošković: New Security Strategy Defines Completely New Security System," 2018, https://www.gov.me/en/article/189534--minister-boskovic-new-security-strategy-defines-completely-new-security-system (accessed April 23, 2025).
[165]Government of Montenegro, "New Security Strategy Defines New System."
[166] Government of Montenegro, *Press Release from 104th Cabinet Session* [press release], 2018, https://www.gov.me/en/article/195173--press-release-from-104th-cabinet-session (accessed April 23, 2025).

Alliance security, emphasizing NATO's role and the need for resilience against hybrid threats, terrorism, and foreign influence[167].

According to the new security strategy, a new military doctrine was adopted. A new Defense Strategy was adopted in 2019[168]. This document further operationalized the country's defense policy in the NATO era. It emphasized new reforms of force structure, capability targets, and the role of the Armed Forces of Montenegro in collective defense and international missions. Additionally, Montenegro continued to implement reforms initiated during the NATO accession process – for instance, strengthening democratic oversight of the armed forces and intelligence sector (to meet Alliance standards on rule of law and security-sector governance)[169]. New Strategic documents acknowledged new regional dynamics, such as increased great power competition in the Balkans, and once again stressed commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. By 2022, the government extended these plans with an Action Plan for implementation of the National Security Strategy 2018–2020[170], and likely subsequent plans, ensuring that the strategies were not just words but followed by concrete measures in areas like cyber security (for which a dedicated strategy 2018–2021 was launched)[171].

The NATO commitment reflected on the country's defense expenditure throughout this timeframe. In the early years of arms race, Montenegro was preparing for NATO entry, so the military spending remained modest – approximately 1.4% of GDP in 2014 ($68 million)[172]. The lowest point was 2017, when the spending was only 1.36% of GDP, considering Montenegro's limited budget capacity. Nevertheless, after joining NATO, the government tried to increase spending toward NATO's 2% of GDP guideline according to the summit in Wales in 2014. While Montenegro's defense expenditure as a percentage of GDP remained stable at approximately 1.4-1.7% between 2014-2024, absolute spending increased from $62 million to $89 million, reflecting nominal budget growth amid economic expansion[173]. In 2020 a rise occurred, approximately 2.05% of GDP, mostly due to the

[167] Balkan Defence Monitor, *Montenegro, Report No. BDM-SD-2023-01*, 2023, https://balkandefencemonitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/montenegro-BDM-SD-2023-01.pdf (accessed April 23, 2025).
[168] Transparency International Defence & Security, *Government Defence Integrity Index: Montenegro*, *GDI-2020 Brief*, 2021, https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/11/Montenegro_GDI-2020-Brief.pdf (accessed April 23, 2025).
[169] Government of Montenegro, *Fifth Annual National Programme*.
[170] Government of Montenegro, "New Security Strategy Defines New System."
[171] Government of Montenegro, *Cyber Security Strategy of Montenegro 2018–2021*, 2018, https://www.gov.me/en/documents/fa4f3ed4-d059-4958-8847-d6111360a477 (accessed April 23, 2025).
[172] IndexMundi, "Montenegro – Military Expenditure (% of GDP)," 2024, https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/montenegro/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS (accessed April 23, 2025).
[173] Macrotrends, *Montenegro Military Spending/Defense Budget 1990–2024*, 2024, https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/MNE/montenegro/military-spending-defense-budget (accessed April 23, 2025).

economic contraction during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made a roughly constant defense budget suddenly form a large GDP share[174]. It also signaled a new trend, and an investments focus. By 2022, military spending reached $98 million[175], which is an increase of nearly 45% in dollar terms from 2014. In recent years, this trend accelerated, as Montenegro proclaimed new procurement projects. NATO projections showed that the country's defense budget reached around $150 million by 2024 (roughly 2-2.5% of GDP) according to the procurement plans[176]. This increase emphasizes the country's economic recovery after the pandemic and government loans. In 2023, the government approved a $75 million loan specifically to finance military procurement scheduled for 2025[177]. In absolute terms, despite a significant increase, Montenegro's defense budget remains the smallest in the region, with increases leaving the Montenegro reliant on allies for high-end capabilities.

The Armed Forces of Montenegro are relatively small (around 2,000 active personnel)[178], with the mostly aging Yugoslav-era equipment, like majority of the countries in the region. The key areas for modernization after 2014 were professionalizing its forces and acquiring modern systems from foreign partners. A light firepower for ground forces was a top priority for the country. In 2019, Montenegro made a landmark $35 million deal with Israel's Elbit Systems to provide Remote Controlled Weapon Stations for new armored vehicles[179]. These Remote-Controlled Weapon Stations are installed on Oshkosh Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTV), the vehicles Montenegro bought from the U. S[180]. This was notable procurement that enhanced patrol capabilities, enabling the army to operate weapons under armor and at night.

Despite the country's small Navy and Air Force capabilities, Montenegro has looked to upgrade these areas. In 2024 the Ministry of Defense published plans to acquire new offshore patrol vessels

[174] IndexMundi, "Montenegro – Military Expenditure (% of GDP)."
[175] Macrotrends, *Montenegro Military Spending 1990–2024*.
[176] NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries* (2014–2023), June 17, 2024, 6, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf (accessed April 23, 2025).
[177] Vijesti, "NATO Requirements Cost €75 Million: Budget for 2025 Foresees Procurement for Montenegrin Army," 2024, https://en.vijesti.me/news-b/politika/733590/NATO-requirements-cost-75-million (accessed April 23, 2025).
[178] Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Military and Security Service Personnel Strengths*, The World Factbook 2021, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2021/field/military-and-security-service-personnel-strengths/ (accessed April 23, 2025).
[179] Defense News, "In First Deal with Montenegro, Israel to Provide Remote-Control Weapons Stations," December 18, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/industry/2019/12/18/in-first-deal-with-montenegro-israel-to-provide-remote-control-weapons-stations/ (accessed April 23, 2025).
[180] Ibid.

from France[181]. Besides these plans, the navy operates a few older patrol boats, therefore the new procurement would mark a major modernization of its fleet. Regarding the air force, it is limited to transport and liaison helicopters. Modernization plans are oriented at training and light utility helicopters to improve air mobility. Since the modernization in this area is limited, the country would still rely on the allies for air surveillance. Montenegro is not yet a part of the European Union, however, the goal is set to achieve membership by 2028. However, Montenegro has been receiving multiple aids provided by the European Union, which significantly supports the country's self-defense resilience, and it would contribute to international mission conducted by the country[182].

The country heavily relies on foreign assistance, and the crucial partners for Montenegro's military modernization have been NATO allies, such as the U.S., Turkey, and regional neighbors. The U.S. has remained as the most significant partner for Montenegro, both in financing and providing equipment for military, Turkey with an updated role in the Western Balkans, regaining lost influence, is considerably supporting the country's defense industry. This has become evident after reaching defense cooperation agreement in 2018. Another crucial partner for Montenegro were Austria and Germany since majority of light weaponry are with Western European origin. For instance, the country is using infantry such as Austrian *Steyr* AUG and German *Heckler & Koch* riffles, replacing outdated Yugoslav arms[183]. These two countries made considerable donations, especially regarding trucks and SUVs for logistics. Communications gears are coming from Norway[184]. After a decade of significant investments, Montenegro's armed forces now have a heterogeneous inventory, mix of outdated Yugoslav one and modern imports, but the clear trend is moving toward full NATO interoperability.

Despite its relatively small size, Montenegro actively participated in international security missions for over a decade, seeking to demonstrate solidarity with its allies. Even before the NATO membership, Podgorica participated in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan from 2010, sending small contingent of troops under German regional command[185]. The country remained in Afghanistan until the mission's end, but mostly to NATO's Resolute Support Mission. This was a valuable experience for

[181] Army Recognition, "Montenegro Expresses Interest in French Offshore Patrol Vessels," April 5, 2024, https://armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2024/montenegro-expresses-interest-in-french-offshore-patrol-vessels/ (accessed April 23, 2025).
[182] European External Action Service (EEAS), "EU Provides €6 Million in Military Support to Montenegro," 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/eu-provides-%E2%82%AC6-million-military-support-montenegro_en (accessed April 23, 2025).
[183] Army Recognition, "Montenegro Expresses Interest in Patrol Vessels."
[184] Ibid.
[185] Government of Montenegro, "Development of Relations Between Montenegro and NATO."

its army signaling the country's willingness to contribute to global security despite its size. Even though the country was affected in the 1999 NATO's aggression on former Yugoslavia, Montenegro has joined the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force in *Kosovo with symbolically small contingent[186]. However, this was significant due to the fact that Montenegro has recognized *Kosovo and supports stability there. Even after the *Milo Djukanovic's* regime has changed, the newly elected President stated that Montenegro will not withdraw its recognition[187].

Regionally, the country has participated in many joint exercises and defense cooperation frameworks. It is part of the US-Adriatic Charter (with Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia), fostering regional defense coordination. Podgorica officially joins multinational military drills, often hosted by U.S. European Command or NATO. The country took several initiatives, such as the 2019 initiative, when it co-hosted the "Immediate Response" exercise with U.S. forces, testing the logistics of moving Allied troops across the Western Balkans[188]. This move demonstrates the NATO's presence in the region. Besides the cooperation with allies, the country deepened bilateral ties with neighboring countries, such as Croatia and Albania. It conducts joint training with both Croatia and Albania, "making" a small Adriatic NATO members sharing common security concerns. Moreover, the country in 2022 signed agreement with Slovenia and North Macedonia on joint procurement of unmanned aerial systems, aiming to economically acquire drone capabilities through a pooled approach[189].

Montenegro has been actively participating in international forums on security sector reforms, especially through the OSCE and UN, gaining expertise to strengthen its institutions. Since the country is the EU candidate, Montenegro aligns its defense policies with the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy too. It has been stated that the country is willing to join future EU Battlegroups and is willing to work on improving military mobility across its borders[190]. All these cooperative efforts

[186] Transparency International Defence & Security, *Government Defence Integrity Index:* Montenegro Brief, November 2021, 5, https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/11/Montenegro_GDI-2020-Brief.pdf (accessed April 23, 2025).
[187] Taylor-Braće, Alice. "Montenegro Won't Withdraw Recognition of Kosovo as the EU Calls for Calm." *EURACTIV*, 2023. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/montenegro-wont-withdraw-recognition-of-kosovo-as-the-eu-calls-for-calm/ (accessed April 23, 2025).
[188]Government of Montenegro, "Development of Relations Between Montenegro and NATO."
[189] Government of Slovenia, "Signing of an Agreement on Cooperation Between the Ministries of Defence of Slovenia and Montenegro," August 30, 2023, https://www.gov.si/en/news/2023-08-30-signing-of-an-agreement-on-cooperation-between-the-ministries-of-defence-of-slovenia-and-montenegro/ (accessed April 23, 2025).
[190] European External Action Service (EEAS), "European Peace Facility: Council Adopts First-Ever Assistance Measure to Support Armed Forces of Montenegro," February 28, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/european-peace-facility-council-adopts-first-ever-assistance-measure-support-armed-forces-montenegro_en (accessed April 23, 2025).

underscore that Montenegro views collective security as the best guarantor of its own security. By contributing even modestly to missions abroad, it gains goodwill and professional experience, and by training with stronger allies, it compensates for its limited capabilities.

By joining NATO, the country closed significant gap in the northern Mediterranean after 2017, closing a gap between Croatia and Albania. Its membership has therefore strengthened deterrence in the Balkans, ensuring no hostile power can easily exploit Montenegro's territory or waters as a foothold. Since the country has made a significant shift in relations with Russia, the Article 5 position Montenegro under the NATO's security zone, deterring potential aggression. The country's commitment in supporting NATO's presence and regional initiatives was evident when the country supported NATO expansion to include Bosnia and Herzegovina, arguing that this move would secure peace in the Western Balkans[191].

In practical terms, Montenegro's role in regional stability is mostly diplomatic and symbolic, given its limited military assets. It has no power to project military power on its own, instead it uses its allies and strategic location. The Montenegro's coastal area with the Port of Bar could be useful for NATO logistics in the southern Adriatic. In some sense, the country serves as an example of positive multi-ethnic coexistence (population includes Montenegrins, Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians, Croats), but this coexistence is seen possible for government only through a Western security umbrella. This reduces the space for ethnic conflicts, especially after the volatile period in the 1990s. However, this sometimes comes with the expense of human rights. For instance, the Law introduced in 2020 on Religious Freedom passed in the Montenegrin parliament directly affecting the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church. This decision even affected the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections, since the coalition established with pro-Serbian candidate Krivokapic gained a significant support, with the elections had the highest voter turnout ever recorded in Montenegro (approximately 75%). Besides this episode of complex relations, Montenegro maintains good relations with all its neighbors, promoting peace and stability. For instance, it promoted peace between Serbia and *Kosovo. It has at times offered to mediate or at least to share its perspective as a country that managed a relatively smooth independence (in 2006 via referendum) and then transitioned to NATO/EU paths. In forums like the Balkan Defense Ministerial meetings and the South-Eastern Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM)

[191] Balkan Insight, "Turkey, Montenegro to Enhance Defence Ties."

process, Montenegro consistently advocates cooperation, information-sharing, and joint approaches to challenges like border security and disaster response – contributing to a climate of trust in the region.

Despite modernization efforts, the biggest constraint for national security is limited military capacity with 2,000 active troops and budget under $100 million. The country is lacking in air force, small navy, and its army being lightly equipped. Therefore, the country relies heavily on NATO support for any high-end defense requirements, even for maintenance and training. Recruitment and retention of professional soldiers is also a concern, as better-paying civilian jobs or emigration can draw away talent – a common issue in small Balkan countries.

Political instability and polarization of the population have posed significant risk to a security policy. After three decades of rule by the pro-Western DPS party, Montenegro experienced a change of government in 2020 and again in 2022, with power shifting to opposition groups that included some pro-Serbia and later pro-Western elements. However, pro-Serbian element was also a part of the broader pro-Western alignment. This led to internal debates about Montenegro's direction. Defense reforms could be limited due to the constant tension between the pro-Western sentiments and Eurosceptics, or even pro-Moscow leanings. In fact, domestic polarization over identity (Montenegrin vs. Serb) and religion (the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church) has been actively exploited by external actors[192]. This demonstrates how corruption and weak institutions can be security vulnerability. Corruption and organized crime further complicate Montenegro's defense environment. The country has struggled with graft and powerful smuggling networks for years (it was famously a hub for cigarette smuggling in the 1990s). These illicit interests can undermine state institutions and public trust. Transparency International's Defense Integrity Index flagged Montenegro for "critical corruption risks" in military operations and procurement, citing extremely weak safeguards as of 2020[193]. Such limitations could lead to misallocation of defense funds. Although the government has tried to improve integrity and increase transparency, the progress remains limited.

Another limitation is economic vulnerability and foreign debt, which indirectly affects security. An example of this would be Montenegro's heavy borrowing from China for a significant social project. While it is not directly affecting the military, such economic leverage could shift to political

[192] Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and NATO," November 28, 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro-weaponization-and-exploitation-history-religion-and (accessed April 23, 2025).
[193] Transparency International Defence & Security, *Government Defence Integrity Index: Montenegro*, 5.

pressure. Additionally, the commitment to reach 2% of GDP according to NATO's guidelines could result in an obstacle for a small economy, since the expenditure on defense is less for social services and development. Public opinion on NATO's membership is divided, since in time of accession in 2017, approximately half of the population supported joining, with many opposing due to the memories of 1999 NATO aggression in Yugoslavia. However, the government's position is non-negotiable toward NATO membership, yet any major corruption scandal or defense misstep could increase opposition narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the post-2014 security landscape in the Western Balkans is shaped by diverging national trajectories, driven by distinct strategic doctrines, alliance affiliations, and internal governance capacities. It reveals that while all regional actors have responded to the deteriorating global security environment - triggered notably by Russia's annexation of Crimea - their reactions have varied significantly in terms of scope, intent, and strategic orientation.

NATO membership has clearly functioned as a critical structuring factor: Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have all pursued modernization through the framework of interoperability, defense reforms, and participation in international missions. These countries have increasingly relied on partnerships with the U.S., Turkey, and other NATO actors to upgrade their armed forces and adopt Western standards of strategic planning. In contrast, Serbia's pursuit of military neutrality and independent modernization - while diversifying procurement channels between East and West - reflects a more autonomous, yet reactive, approach aimed at strategic balancing in a competitive environment. Bosnia and Herzegovina, meanwhile, illustrates the limits of formal commitments in the absence of domestic political cohesion, offering a case where internal fragmentation has paralyzed external alignment and military transformation.

Beyond categorizing countries as NATO vs. non-NATO, the chapter also highlights that modernization has been pursued not only as a technical process, but as a reflection of political identity and strategic intent. Defense spending, doctrinal revisions, and military procurement choices are intimately tied to each state's broader geopolitical calculus and domestic political narrative.

This comparative analysis underscores that regional military developments cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, they are deeply embedded in a wider matrix of external alignments,

historical path dependencies, and institutional capacities. As such, Chapter 2 lays a crucial foundation for Chapter 3, which examines how external actors - such as the U.S., Russia, China, the EU, NATO, and Turkey - intervene in this fragmented security environment, shaping and at times reinforcing the region's strategic divergence.

Chapter III - External Influences and Geopolitical Implications

Since the region itself has held strategic importance as a crossroads between East and West, it has always attracted great-power ambitions, projecting its power throughout history. The region witnessed many empires that have ended their dominance in the region, from the Ottoman to Austro-Hungarian. The majority of them have competed for dominance and have continued to do so. Control over the region was seen as key to projecting influence on Europe and the Mediterranean. In the Cold War, competition for influence continued, yet the order was violated when Yugoslavia proclaimed a non-alignment policy, buffering East-West tensions. However, the federation collapsed in the 1990s and opened the area to intense external intervention.

External influence directly affected the Yugoslav conflicts in the 1990s, especially the outcome of the conflicts on the ground. The United States and NATO allies intervened militarily to enforce peace settlements in Bosnia and later in *Kosovo[194]. It was a turning point for NATO, as it marked the alliance's first military operation after the Cold War and reflected changes in its strategy. NATO conducted air strikes in 1995 to pressure parties' actions in Bosnia, and in 1999 waged an air war against Serbia (former Yugoslavia) to protect *Kosovo Albanian civilians. However, these actions raised controversy due to NATO's actions bypassing international law, the UN Charter, and the resolutions from the UN Security Council, creating significant concerns about the violation of international peace principles according to the UN Charter. Moreover, the U.S. "forced" parties to sign the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, since they were negotiating under U.S. "*patronage*", which formally ended the Bosnian war and made a path for a NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina[195]. Both the European Union and the United Nations played roles through diplomacy and peacekeeping deployments, though playing a "secondary" position, leaving the "lead" to the U.S. and NATO. Meanwhile, Russia attempted to maintain influence in the region with historical claims, although its position was particularly weak due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and reforms pushed by the newly elected government under Yeltsin. Russia was in the process of formulating its foreign policy, which reflected on the peace talks, since Russia immediately supported Yugoslavia's

[194] NATO, "15 Years Ago, Dayton Peace Accords: A Milestone for NATO and the Balkans," 2010, https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/news_69290.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed April 24, 2025)
[195] NATO, "Dayton Peace Accords: A Milestone for NATO and the Balkans"; Holbrooke, *To End a War*, 230–315.; Momir Bulatović, *Neizgovorena odbrana* (Niš: Zograf; Podgorica: Zetra, 2006)

sovereignty and changed its position, supporting Croatia's independence in 1991-1992, and then in the final years of the conflict, Moscow participated in peace talks and sent its troops to Bosnia, agreeing to the Western-designed peace framework. In summary, by the end of the 1990s, the Western Balkans' security architecture was being set largely by U.S. and NATO intervention, with the EU supporting and Russia sidelined.

The U.S./NATO-driven settlements in the Balkans produced a fragile yet strategically favorable peace structure. This structure was evident in Bosnia. The violence was frozen due to the Dayton's Agreement, shaped by American diplomacy and enforced by NATO troops. Bosnia remained a multinational state within its pre-war borders, yet the deal institutionalized ethno-territorial division (Bosnia was split into two autonomous entities under heavy international supervision)[196]. This accord prioritized short-term stability in the region and secured Western strategic goals over gradual democratic integration. For example, Henry Kissinger warned that forcing Bosnia to form a state with three opposed ethnic communities would "sooner or later explode," since the Dayton Agreement put an emphasis on wartime partition lines rather than resolving underlying conflicts[197]. Furthermore, economist Jeffrey Sachs later denounced NATO's 1999 Kosovo campaign as an illegal strategy to redraw Serbia's borders and establish a U.S. military footprint, rather than a principled humanitarian intervention[198]. Such critiques emphasize that the peace accords of the 1990s, while formally ending the conflict on terms favorable to the West, froze the conflict's potential in order to preserve the order rather than addressing their root causes.

The 1999 *Kosovo war* set an important geopolitical precedent that would be repeated in later crises. NATO's "intervention" lacked United Nations authorization, and later, with *Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the signal was sent that the Western allies are willing to bypass traditional sovereignty norms in favor of strategic and moral interests. Russia opposed *Kosovo's independence, but when the West recognized *Kosovo in 2008, Russia gained the possibility to use this as a precedent. In 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, President Vladimir Putin emphasized that if the *Kosovo's action is justified, arguing that if an Albanian-majority province could be taken away from

[196] NATO, "Dayton Peace Accords: A Milestone for NATO and the Balkans."
[197] Henry Kissinger, interview by Charlie Rose, *The Charlie Rose Show*, September 14, 1995, video, https://charlierose.com/videos/19459 (accessed April 24, 2025).
[198] Jeffrey Sachs, Jeffrey Sachs *on NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia*, 2023, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS-3QssVPeg (accessed April 24, 2025).

Serbia with Western backing, then Crimea's secession from Ukraine could be likewise validated[199]. These actions fueled great-power confrontation, which was then reflected in the Western Balkans arms race.

NATO's enlargement affected the region in the early 2000s, when NATO's expansion into Southeastern Europe further heightened great-power stakes in the Balkans. Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, and later Montenegro and North Macedonia all joined the Alliance. From the alliance's perspective, this move was aimed at securing peace in the region and creating a zone of stability and democratic reform. However, Moscow viewed it as a violation of the traditional sphere of influence. Throughout the 2000s, Russia leveraged its close ties with Serbia (and the Serb entity in Bosnia) – through diplomacy, energy deals, and arms sales – to counterbalance NATO's pull. This tension divided Balkans, as countries were often navigating between Euro-Atlantic integration and a Slavi-Orthodox partnership with Russia. This was transformed into a broader Russia-NATO rivalry in the region, with the EU's soft-power influence.

These tensions escalated by 2014, resulting in a new phase of militarization and competition in the region, setting the stage for today's arms race. The Ukrainian crisis and Russia-NATO rivalry affected Southeastern Europe. After a decade of low military spending, several states shifted towards increased defense expenditure. Regional leaders, sensing a more confrontational international environment, sought security by increasing defense budgets and finding external patrons. External actors openly "fed" the new arms race: Russia by selling weaponry, China by using soft power, NATO by military trainings and arms deals, and Turkey by expanding their footprints. This upgrade of competitive armament has raised alarms that the fragile peace established after the 1990s could be undermined, as the region once again becomes an arena for geopolitical maneuvering[200].

In the following chapter of this thesis, it will be critically examined each of the major external influences shaping the Western Balkans' security dynamics. The roles and strategies of NATO, Russia, China, Turkey, the United States, and the European Union will be analyzed in turn, to assess how their involvement has contributed to the current regional military buildup and what implications this holds for Balkan stability. This critical analysis will clear up the interplay of global and local forces in the

[199] Balkan Insight, "Crimea Secession Just Like Kosovo: Putin," March 18, 2014, https://balkaninsight.com/2014/03/18/crimea-secession-just-like-kosovo-putin/ (accessed April 24, 2025).
[200] Blerim Reka, "A New Military Buildup in the Balkans," *GIS Reports*, January 10, 2019, https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/balkans-military/ (accessed April 24, 2025).

post-2014 Western Balkan arms race, setting the foundation for understanding the security dilemmas faced by the region today.

3.1.NATO's Role in Militarization and Security Dynamics in the Western Balkans (2014-2024)

Before 2014, NATO gradually accepted countries within the alliance in and around the region. Albania and Croatia became NATO member countries in 2009, marking a major move into Southeast Europe. Montenegro joined the organization in 2017, after an agreement in 2015, and North Macedonia after resolving a dispute in 2020. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain outside the alliance, cooperating only as partners, since Serbia joined Partnership for Peace in 2006 and Bosnia opened an Annual National Programme in 2008. As a result, the four countries in the region are members of the alliance and two are partners, reflecting the post-1990s effort to align its foreign policies with the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Considerable influence on the NATO's strategy had the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. At the Wales Summit (September 2014) Allies condemned Russia's actions as a "serious breach of international law" and declared that they do not recognize Russia's annexation[201]. NATO changed its priorities from out-of-area operations to collective defense. It launched the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) to reinforce the eastern flank and created a new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) capable of deploying troops at very short notice[202]. This was a radical shift of defense posture, refocusing on Russia as a major threat.

This, as a result, affected NATO's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans, reaffirming commitment to regional stability. At the Wales Summit, allies emphasized the strategic importance of the region and their full commitment to the stability and security of the Balkans. Furthermore, the Wales Summit welcomed Serbia's partnership with NATO and encouraged Serbia's cooperation in resolving *Kosovo's issue[203]. Within NATO's Program for Partnership, Serbia and NATO held annual

[201] NATO, *Wales Summit Declaration*, 2014, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm (accessed April 24, 2025).
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.

drills (such as "*Platinasti Vuk*"), and officer training programs[204]. Moreover, the U.S. donated to Serbia M1117 armored vehicles ($7.5M), parachutes, and reconnaissance drones. At the next summit in Warsaw in 2016, the allies underscored the Western Balkans' strategic importance, emphasizing once again the security of the region. In Warsaw, allies underlined the support for the reforms and welcomed the progress made in NATO-Serbia's partnership[205]. That summit also affirmed progress toward Montenegro's membership and maintained an open door to all aspiring states.

The Brussels Summit in July 2018 affirmed NATO's role in the region. The language of the summit was identical. Yet, it emphasized that NATO's presence in *Kosovo (through KFOR) is crucial for stability; however, reducing troops would depend on the specific conditions, not strictly on the calendar[206]. In this document, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina was welcomed and strongly supported for maintaining peace. A key point was the special importance put on NATO's Open-Door policy, highlighting Montenegro's membership and North Macedonia's invitation as clear examples of how enlargement contributes to strengthening regional security[207].

At this stage, it is essential to assess Bosnia and Herzegovina's national security posture, as it has been deeply shaped by external actors. Moreover, BiH has become a country for external geopolitical rivalries due to the domestic institutional weakness between NATO/EU and Russia. Bosnia strives to join both NATO and the EU, but the progress is lacking. BiH has been a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace since 2006 and was conditionally invited into the Membership Action Plan (*MAP*) in 2010. However, due to the opposition by *Republika Srpska*, Bosnia's participation stagnated. An important development occurred when Sarajevo submitted a Reform Program to NATO in 2019, which was the same MAP program with different names[208]. This allowed BiH to activate the MAP process without formally provoking an RS veto. Nevertheless, NATO has headquarters in Sarajevo to coordinate assistance[209]. After the war in Ukraine started, NATO decided to increase support for Bosnia as a vulnerable partner on Russia's periphery. In February 2023, NATO defense ministers approved a

[204] Ministry of Defence, *Bela knjiga odbrane*, 28–3; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, *"Međunarodna taktička vežba 'Platinasti vuk* 24'," 2024, https://www.mod.gov.rs/lat/21333/medjunarodna-takticka-vezba-platinasti-vuk-2421333 (accessed April 8, 2025)
[205] NATO, *Warsaw Summit Communiqué Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government*, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm (accessed April 24, 2025).
[206] NATO, *Brussels Summit Declaration*, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm (accessed April 24, 2025).
[207] Ibid.
[208] DTT-NET, "Defense Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina".
[209] NATO, "Defence Capacity Building (DCB)," 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49127.htm (accessed April 15, 2025).

new Defense Capacity Building package for BiH, aimed at strengthening areas like cyber defense, counterterrorism, crisis response, and military medicine[210]. However, full NATO membership remains a distant prospect due to internal opposition.

The next summit in London in 2019 focused more on burden-sharing. The London Declaration emphasized the Defense Investment Pledge that allies are increasing defense investment in line with NATO's 2% and 20% guidelines[211]. The declaration signaled pressure on Balkan member states to raise spending and on partners to modernize their forces. According to the declaration, allies clarified that Western Balkan stability is integral to Euro-Atlantic security. The summit in Brussels in 2021 stressed again the same goals towards ensuring security in the region and pointed out the importance of NATO-Serbia's partnership and urged for Belgrade-Pristina talks to be renewed[212].

At the June 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO adopted a new Strategic Concept that for the first time, explicitly named the Western Balkans. It expresses the aspiration of interested countries to join NATO and support towards that idea. Moreover, the concept pledges to enhance efforts to bolster their capabilities in order to address the distinct threats and challenges they face and boost their resilience against third-party interference and coercion[213]. This made it clear how the alliance views the region as a vulnerable frontier requiring fortification against external threats. The UK Prime Minister warned that the alliance must not allow the Balkans to become "*another playground*" for Vladimir Putin's goals, and NATO agreed to send additional military advisers to Bosnia to strengthen local NATO HQ[214].

This timeline shows NATO's gradual approach towards the region and increased importance for the alliance's security. NATO guidelines of 2% of GDP on defense have had a significant impact on the region's militarization since the goals were declared in 2014 and again reconfirmed in 2019. In practice, many Balkan countries have increased their military budgets, even the states with limited capabilities. According to the data, Serbia (not even a member) reached 2% of GDP by 2023[215]. Croatia

[210] Ibid.
[211] NATO, *London Declaration*, 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm (accessed April 24, 2025).
[212] NATO, *Brussels Summit Communiqué*, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm (accessed April 24, 2025).
[213] European Western Balkans, "Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans Included in NATO Strategic Concept 2022," July 1, 2022, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/07/01/bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-the-western-balkans-included-in-nato-strategic-concept-2022/ (accessed April 24, 2025).
[214] European Western Balkans, "Western Balkans in NATO Strategic Concept."
[215] European Western Balkans, "Who Is Spending the Most on Defence in the Balkans?" March 22, 2024. https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/03/22/who-is-spending-the-most-on-defence-in-the-balkans/ (accessed April 24, 2025).

and North Macedonia also reached approximately the same numbers in 2023, while Albania passed legislation to speed up the process of meeting NATO's guidelines, and likely those numbers were met in 2024[216]. Budgets of most countries have nearly doubled, especially since 2017. For instance, Zagreb's budgets increased to fund new arms – notably French *Rafale* fighters. In contrast, Serbia's government pursued a years-long push to increase its arsenals with billions of dollars of Russian and Chinese equipment[217]. As a result, the arms race has become a reality, especially between Serbia and Croatia, reflecting on others.

However, some analysts underscore that the current military buildup is mostly motivated by political factors rather than the threat of conflict escalation. One analysis explains that although Serbia and Croatia are quickly increasing their arsenals and budgets, it would be inaccurate to describe the current situation as an arms race[218]. Leaders in both countries have used this modernization to advance ambitious foreign policy and domestic politics, while the probability of a conflict remains low. Nevertheless, this heated rhetoric fuels a security dilemma, since the defensive modernizations by one are perceived as threats by neighbors, prompting reactive measures. For example, Croatia's procurement of U.S. rocket systems in 2015 pushed Serbia to respond (driving Serbia into talks for Russian S-300 missiles)[219]. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also affected, considering *Republika Srpska's* position within the country and heated rhetoric among ethnic leaders. In summary, NATO's 2%/20% spending guidelines have raised the overall military profile of the Balkans (especially among Croatia, Albania, and Serbia), but they have also intensified mutual suspicions, producing a classic arms race/security dilemma dynamic in the region.

Among NATO's members in the region, the most fully integrated and militarily capable NATO partner is Croatia, the region's largest military power (second only to Serbia in absolute size)[220]. Albania joined NATO in the same year as Croatia, yet Albania has steadily met or approached NATO's spending norm. Montenegro and North Macedonia represent relatively "new" members, valuable for the alliance, yet with relatively small capabilities. Nonetheless, they both meet many NATO obligations. These four Allies in the Western Balkans are NATO's closest partners and most committed

[216] Ibid.
[217] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *Political Trends & Dynamics: Security and Arms Control in Southeast Europe*, 2021, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/12902/2021-02.pdf (accessed April 24, 2025).
[218] *Vuk Vuksanović and Marko Ignjatijević*, "What's Behind the Arms Buildup in the Balkans," *War on the Rocks*, December 28, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/whats-behind-the-arms-buildup-in-the-balkans/ (accessed April 24, 2025).
[219] Ibid.
[220] Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *Political Trends & Dynamics: Security and Arms Control in Southeast Europe*, 10.

militarily. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, by contrast, remain Partnership for Peace countries with no membership promise.

Albania, although smaller in size, has similarly demonstrated deep integration into NATO's regional security posture and participation in alliance-led missions. Between 2014 and 2025, approximately 8,000 Albanian Armed Forces personnel rotated through various international peacekeeping missions under NATO, EU, or UN mandates[221]. Despite missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Latvia, and South Sudan, Albanian peacekeepers have been part of KFOR in *Kosovo[222]. Participating in various missions, Albania has earned a reputation as a reliable ally. Regionally, Albania has cooperation with its Balkan neighbors, but mostly with other pro-NATO states, as a part of its defense posture. Albania is a founding member of the US-Adriatic Charter (A-5), working alongside Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to promote regional defense coordination. Moreover, Albania hosted Exercise "*Defender Europe 21*" in 2021, the largest military drill in the region, involving 6,000 U.S. and allied troops[223]. Albania also engages in regular regional exercises like the Adriatic-Ionian (*ADRION*) naval drills and Balkan special forces exercises (e.g., "*Balkan Eagle*" and "*Strong Balkan 23*" which Albania hosted for special operations forces)[224].

From 2022 to 2025, Croatia aimed to keep defense spending near 2% of GDP. Overall, from 2014 to 2025, Croatia's defense budget nearly doubled, showing its effort to modernize the military and take on more NATO duties[225]. The Ministry of Defense reported steady increases in spending on equipment and facilities from 2016 to 2021. Croatia's Defense Minister, *Ivan Anušić*, stated that Croatia plans to boost defense spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 and to 3% by 2030[226]. It is worth explaining that Croatia's defense budget mostly goes to personnel costs, for instance, salaries and

[221] Albanian Daily News, "8,000 Albanian Soldiers Have Served in NATO, EU, UN Missions," 2023, https://albaniandailynews.com/news/-8-000-albanian-soldiers-have-served-in-nato-eu-un-missions--1 (accessed April 16, 2025).
[222] National Guard, "In Albania, Hokanson Sees Committed Partner, Steadfast NATO Ally," June 21, 2023. https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article-View/Article/3434659/in-albania-hokanson-sees-committed-partner-steadfast-nato-ally/ (accessed April 16, 2025).
[223] U.S. Army Europe-Africa, *DEFENDER-Europe 21 Infographic*, 2021, https://www.europeafrica.army.mil/Portals/19/documents/DEFENDEREurope/DE21%20Infographic.pdf (accessed April 16, 2025).
[224] Balkan Defence Monitor, "International Military Cooperation – Albania – 2024," 2024. https://balkandefencemonitor.com/international-military-cooperation-albania-2024/ (accessed April 16, 2025).
[225] NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries* (2014–2024).
[226] Reuters, "Croatia to Increase Defence Spending to 3% of GDP by 2030," 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/croatia-increase-defence-spending-3-gdp-by-2030-2025-04-08/ (accessed April 12, 2025).

veteran pensions, taking up 60–70% of spending. In the late 2010s, these costs, plus operations, left only 10–15% for new weapons and equipment. This is common for NATO member countries but limited Croatia's modernization funds[227]. Croatia used U.S. aid and EU grants for big purchases. Moving into the mid-2020s, budgets should stay at NATO's 2% GDP level, supporting modernization, troop welfare, and training[228].

NATO's official rhetoric and strategy have been evolving through the years, gaining importance in treating the region as a contested zone on the Alliance's southeastern flank. The strategy demonstrates willingness to counter Russia's (to a lesser extent, Chinese) influence in the region. Many reject the idea that NATO's military presence in the region reflects revisionist ambitions to expand its sphere of influence. Instead, they view NATO's role as a stabilizing and balancing force. However, considering statements from NATO's member countries' officials, especially in recent years, it is evident that Alliance strategy views the Western Balkans through the lens of great-power competition. NATO's objective is to shift the regional balance toward Euro-Atlantic integration and decrease Russia's influence. This objective follows neorealist principles, where great powers compete for influence in the Balkans to ensure their stability, while smaller states adapt by hedging, frequently acquiring weapons or exploiting rivalry for their own benefit[229].

Despite NATO's efforts and initiatives, local perceptions are mixed and often skeptical. A major obstacle is Serbia's "memory" of the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Partnership with NATO lacks public support due to the legacy of air strikes (which killed civilians and destroyed infrastructure), especially arguing that NATO was an aggressor, not a protector. The signs are still visible in the capital of Serbia. Recent polls show overwhelming opposition to NATO membership, with only 11% of the population in favor of membership[230]. The Bosnian population has similar sentiments about wartime atrocities, especially from Serbs in *Republika Srpska*. From a theoretical standpoint, these dynamics explain a security dilemma. NATO's defensive enhancements (forces, partnerships, exhortations) are perceived by some local actors as threatening, provoking them to bolster their own security (military spending, Russian alignment). In turn, those reactions reinforce NATO's

[227] China-CEE Institute, *Croatia External Relations Briefing*.
[228] Ibid.
[229] NATO Defense College Foundation, *The Balkans Beyond KFOR*, 2025, https://www.natofoundation.org/the-balkans-beyond-kfor/ (accessed April 24, 2025).
[230] *Blic*, "*ISTRAŽIVANJE: Za članstvo Srbije u NATO 11 odsto građana,"* 2020, https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/istrazivanje-za-clanstvo-srbije-u-nato-11-odsto-gradjana/4g1rqf0 (accessed April 24, 2025).

sense of threat. The region thus becomes a microcosm of great-power competition: NATO and Russia play out balance-of-power politics through their local partners, and smaller states maneuver between them. In this environment, NATO's credibility hinges on carefully balancing deterrence with dialogue and addressing historical grievances. Only by doing so can the Alliance credibly claim to enhance security rather than to "heat up" an arms race in the Balkans.

3.2. United States Influence on Western Balkans Militarization and Security Dynamics (2014–2025)

Since the breakup of Yugoslavia, the United States has been a central security actor in the Western Balkans. A decisive moment for the U.S. was the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, which ended the Bosnian War and opened the way for NATO's first post-Cold War peacekeeping mission in the region. The multinational peacekeeping mission signaled an increase in U.S. commitment to the region's security. In 1999 the U.S. led NATO's air "intervention" in the *Kosovo conflict, a 78-day bombing campaign to prevent Serbian forces from regaining control over its southern province of *Kosovo and Metohija*. On the one hand, NATO claimed that the intervention was conducted in order to prevent ethnic cleansing. On the other, Serbia conducted military operations as a legitimate effort to counter armed separatism and terrorism. Nonetheless, this intervention resulted in the *Kumanovo Agreement* and the withdrawal of Serbian security forces from *Kosovo and Metohija*, placing Kosovo under international administration and peacekeeping. NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) was established after the agreement to provide security, and the U.S. contributed with a large contingent of troops. The U.S. built the largest military base in Southeast Europe, in *Kosovo – Bondsteel. At its peak, KFOR deployed over 50,000 peacekeepers in 1999. By 2023 number significantly reduced to roughly 3,700 troops (including approximately 700 U.S. soldiers)[231]. The U.S. presence in the region represents America's post-1990s role as a security guarantor in the region. These events set the stage for America's influence on the region's security dynamics in the 21st century.

An important part of the U.S. strategy in the region has been the support for Euro-Atlantic integration, especially the enlargement of NATO toward the Balkans. Washington backed the accession

[231] Fatos Bytyci, "NATO Troops on Guard in North Kosovo for Third Day amid Protests," *Reuters*, May 31, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/us-troops-guard-town-hall-northern-kosovo-2023-05-31/ (accessed April 24, 2025).

of the countries in the region despite opposition from Russia. The support was reflected in the U.S. Senate, voting 97-2 to ratify Montenegro's accession to NATO[232]. Similarly, the U.S. backed North Macedonia's accession and supported the Prespa Agreement in resolving the disputes with Greece.

America's backing of NATO expansion in the Balkans has had a major impact on the region's security dynamics. On the one hand, it expanded the zone of stability under NATO's Article 5 security guarantee. Many NATO member countries had to adjust their military equipment to meet alliance standards, often with U.S. funding and training support. On the other hand, the U.S. stance has heightened tensions with states left outside the alliance. Serbia views NATO's enlargement with concern, as it results in the country being surrounded by neighboring states that are members of NATO, all contributing to a regional security dilemma. In this security dynamic, Serbia deepened security ties with Russia and China, seeking advanced weapons to avoid strategic isolation. Although this policy of enlargement helped stabilize the region, it also unintentionally encouraged militarization among states that remained outside of it.

However, it is crucial for this thesis to evaluate how the U.S. position has evolved across different administrations, as reflected in their policy documents and security strategies. During Barack Obama's second term, the U.S. policy in the region focused on completion of Euro-Atlantic integration amid geopolitical tensions in the East after 2014. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted Washington to secure NATO's eastern flank and prevent any security vacuum in Southeast Europe that Russia could potentially exploit. This administration strongly backed the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina (the Brussels Agreement process) and maintained U.S. peacekeeping troops in Kosovo and Bosnia. In Bosnia, the U.S. administration was putting an emphasis on the Dayton framework and the importance of conducting modest reforms, though progress was limited. A major initiative for the administration was an invitation for Montenegro to join NATO, which resulted in success. While the 2015 National Security Strategy did not explicitly focus on the Western Balkans, its emphasis on reinforcing NATO and supporting the European Union's project implicitly aimed at completing the region's integration. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the U.S. supported the European Reassurance Initiatives, strengthening U.S. military presence in Europe, especially in the eastern flank, and quietly paying attention to the Balkans (e.g., warning Bosnian leaders against separatism and

[232] Scott Neuman, "In Interview, Trump Appears to Question NATO's 'Collective Defense' Clause," *NPR*, July 19, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/07/19/630361006/in-interview-trump-appears-to-question-natos-collective-defense-clause (accessed April 24, 2025).

supporting Macedonia's political stabilization). In summary, the Obama administration's strategy viewed the region as part of a wider effort to promote stability in the context of great-power competition.

Donald Trump's presidency introduced new rhetoric regarding the Western Balkans. The new 2017 National Security Strategy marked a shift to "great power competition" as the guiding paradigm. China and Russia were identified as strategic competitors, especially recognizing Moscow's efforts to undermine Western influence in the region[233]. Although Balkan itself was rarely mentioned explicitly, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review reflects on the U.S. strategy of confronting adversaries, especially regarding Russia's arms control violations. This reinforces a more assertive U.S. posture, which has implications for regions like the Balkans.

Trump's presidency showed continuity despite the president's skepticism toward NATO. The U.S. support and American troops remained stationed in Kosovo and Bosnia. Moreover, the administration backed up the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia. Although Trump had doubted the defense of Montenegro in 2018, U.S. foreign policy remained stable, supporting NATO enlargement[234].

The Trump Administration launched a diplomatic initiative in the Belgrade-Pristina dispute, mediating the 2020 Washington Agreement, which focused on economic measures and a diplomatic freeze rather than resolving political issues. The deal was criticized for avoiding addressing core issues. Meanwhile, the U.S. expanded military assistance to Balkan allies: Croatia received support for fighter jet acquisitions and armored vehicles, while *Kosovo's Security Force moved toward building an army with U.S. backing. These actions, though strengthening partnerships, also contributed to regional militarization and heightened Serbian threat perceptions. Overall, the Trump era intensified great-power competition in the Balkans, with U.S. moves often provoking Russian and Chinese countermeasures, firmly returning the region to global rivalry dynamics.

The Biden Administration brought a new approach of re-engagement and democracy versus autocracy, a more traditional multilateralist approach. Biden's administration prioritized the Western

[233] Thomas Karako, *Russia and Arms Control: Extending New START or Starting Over?,* testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment, July 25, 2019, https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109869/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-KarakoT-20190725.pdf (accessed April 24, 2025).
[234] Neuman, "Trump Questions NATO's Collective Defense."

Balkans as a part of a broader global struggle between democracy and autocracy. The 2022 National Security Strategy guaranteed support for rule of law, economic development, and conflict resolution in the region. This direct focus reflected concerns that unresolved disputes could be exploited by Russia or China[235]. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, U.S. diplomatic and military attention to the Balkans intensified. Washington appointed a special envoy (Gabriel Escobar), coordinated closely with the EU, and imposed targeted sanctions on destabilizing actors, such as Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik. The most influential bilateral actor in Bosnia's defense sector has been the U.S. Beyond its role through NATO, the U.S. provides direct military assistance and training. BiH has partnered with the Maryland National Guard under the State Partnership Program since 2003, fostering ongoing exchange[236]. The United States has also funded infrastructure upgrades (like arms storage improvements) and donated equipment such as HMMWV vehicles and uniforms. American diplomatic pressure has been important in pushing BiH defense reforms: U.S. officials frequently urge Bosnian leaders to overcome ethnic disagreements for the sake of NATO integration. The U.S. also maintained and reinforced its military presence, deploying additional troops to *Kosovo in 2023 during local unrest and pressuring both *Kosovo and Serbia to de-escalate. Economically, the U.S. encouraged initiatives like the "*Open Balkans*" project while supporting regional energy diversification to reduce dependence on Russia. Military aid continued, benefiting U.S.-aligned states like North Macedonia and Albania, while Serbia cautiously maintained ties with Russia. The major purchase for Albania was 71 Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs) (armored vehicles) from the United States, agreeing in 2024 to acquire twenty-five more, with the sum totaling ninety-six modern armored vehicles. Besides Albania, the JLTVs have been acquired by Montenegro, signaling increased cooperation in the defense industry. Nevertheless, Albania was one of the key beneficiaries of U.S. military assistance in this period. Through U.S. military aid programs, Albania received over 250 armored vehicles, including Humvees and mine-resistant MaxxPro trucks[237]. These improved troop mobility and protection. Italy also donated armored vehicles, helping Albania phase out obsolete Soviet trucks. Major advancements have been seen concerning combat capabilities with advanced weapons, including U.S.-supplied Javelin

[235] Christopher A. Ford, Assessing the Biden Administration's "Big Four" *National Security Guidance Documents*, *Occasional Paper*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2023), https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/OP-Vol-3-No.-2.pdf (accessed April 24, 2025).
[236] National Guard, "Training Reinforces Bosnia-Herzegovina Partnership," September 21, 2018, https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/1962273/training-reinforces-bosnia-herzegovina-partnership/ (accessed April 15, 2025).
[237] Defence Blog, "US Donates 37 MRAP Vehicles to Albania," 2019, https://defence-blog.com/us-donates-37-mrap-vehicles-to-albania/ (accessed April 16, 2025).

anti-tank missile[238], which is funded by the U.S. military aid. As a result, Albania had shifted from Soviet-era equipment to mobile infantry units with NATO-standard gear by 2024[239]. In 2024, Albania received U.S.-funded UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters[240], enhancing medical, rescue, and NATO mission support. Overall, Biden's approach combined idealism—supporting democracy and integration—with realism, recognizing that failure to engage would leave the Balkans vulnerable to rival powers.

In January 2025, Donald Trump was re-elected for his 2nd term in the White House, raising uncertainty about future engagement in the Western Balkans. Although no major policy shifts have occurred yet, Trump's "*America First*" rhetoric and skepticism toward military commitments and NATO indicate possible changes, including reviewing U.S. troop deployments in Europe, including the Balkans. Discussions during the 2024 U.S. elections raised the question of reducing U.S. military commitments in Europe. Logically, this reduction will affect Camp Bondsteel in *Kosovo, which is the key symbol of U.S. presence. Although the presence of the U.S. at Camp Bondsteel is largely symbolic — with only around 650 U.S. troops stationed there — its potential withdrawal would have broader implications. Beyond the military impact, it would likely lead to a reduction in financial support for other forces stationed in *Kosovo, weakening the overall stability of the mission.

So far, Trump's security team has been non-committal, confirming NATO's importance while urging Europeans to take greater responsibility. Trump's cabinet reflects Trump's pragmatic policy on defense matters, combining figures with Interventionist leanings, individualists that are associated with stronger support for military action, e.g., Marco Rubio (Secretary of State), Mike Waltz (National Security Adviser) and Elbridge Colby (Undersecretary of Defense for Policy), and individuals that are in favor of the "America First" policy, more realist/non-interventionist like Pete Hegseth (Secretary of Defense) and JD Vance (Vice President). The idea was a gradual U.S. pullback or a more transactional approach. Balkan allies like *Kosovo have lobbied to maintain U.S. support, while Serbia sees a potential opportunity for a more favorable U.S. stance. The new cabinet will high likely influence U.S.

[238] Army Recognition, *Albania Acquires Javelin Anti-Tank Missiles from United States*, 2024, https://armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/2024/albania-acquires-javelin-anti-tank-missiles-from-united-states (accessed April 16, 2025)
[239] National Guard, "In Albania, Hokanson Sees Committed Partner, Steadfast NATO Ally," 2023, https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article/3434659/in-albania-hokanson-sees-committed-partner-steadfast-nato-ally/ (accessed April 16, 2025).
[240] Vertical Mag, "Albania Receives 2 UH-60 Black Hawks," 2024, https://verticalmag.com/news/albania-receives-2-uh-60-black-hawks/ (accessed April 16, 2025).

military policy in the Balkans. On the one hand, Rubio and Waltz are more focused on countering Russia and China, so their approach would favor more U.S. military exercises to bolster these allies' defense, particularly against Serbia's Russian-aligned military ties. So, the hard stance on Serbia can be expected, and the increase in U.S. military support to *Kosovo and BiH to counter Serbia's influence potentially expanding KFOR's role. On the other hand, Hegseth and Vance may demand greater contributions from these allies. In some sense, engaging Serbia to pull it from Russia's orbit can be expected through economic initiatives or arms deals. The one crucial role for the Balkans would be the U.S. Special Representative to the Western Balkans, which is now Gabriel Escobar. He is expected to critically navigate Serbia-Kosovo negotiations, balancing pressure to isolate Serbia with realist efforts to engage it. The Trump administration's military policy in the Balkans will likely blend hawkish deterrence (Rubio, Waltz) with realist restraint (Hegseth, Vance), shaped by the Special Envoy's diplomatic efforts. Although a complete U.S. withdrawal from the Balkans is unlikely, a shift toward selective engagement — prioritizing visible gains over broader democratic goals — seems possible. Even the perception of U.S. disengagement risks destabilizing the region, possibly accelerating arms buildups and deepening tensions. The early months of 2025 are thus marked by strategic uncertainty, with the Balkans once again vulnerable to great-power rivalry.

Beyond troop deployments, the U.S. strengthened partnerships with Balkan militaries through programs like Foreign Military Financing and joint exercises. This division — NATO-supported states versus a neutral Serbia — accelerated regional militarization. Absent a regional arms control framework, external military support, even if intended for defense, contributed to an arms race dynamic. In some way, the U.S. has attempted to manage escalation and the arms race by adopting measures to prevent further actions by some states, e.g., pressing *Kosovo to delay forming an army. However, great-power competition made it hard to accomplish this policy, which continued to polarize the region.

U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans from 2014 to 2025 produced mixed results. On the one hand, American diplomatic and military efforts helped prevent new wars. Through initiatives like NATO enlargement, diplomatic mediation, and peacekeeping deployments (e.g., KFOR), the U.S. played a stabilizing role, acting as an offshore balancer to maintain regional equilibrium. Historic agreements, such as the *Prespa Agreement*, and interventions during crises (e.g., Kosovo-Serbia disputes, Bosnia's political gridlock) underscore this stabilizing impact. On the other hand, U.S. engagement also contributed to regional militarization. By strongly supporting NATO aspirants while

isolating Serbia and *Republika Srpska*, Washington deepened divisions. Serbia, feeling strategically encircled, accelerated arms purchases from Russia and China, fueling a regional arms race. Croatia responded with its own military build-up, illustrating a classic security dilemma: efforts to enhance security for some inadvertently threatened others. Thus, U.S. influence was stabilizing at the macro level — preventing wars and strengthening alliances — but destabilizing at the micro level by reinforcing rivalries and arms accumulation. The upcoming shifts in U.S. policy under Trump's second term, as well as broader great power dynamics, will be critical in determining whether the Western Balkans moves toward lasting stability or deeper competition.

3.3.Russia's Influence on the Western Balkans and Regional Security Dynamics (2014–2025)

Russia's foreign policy and power projection in the Western Balkans have been linked by shared Slavic ethnicity and Eastern Orthodox faith[241]. Throughout Russia's long history, its rulers emphasized their roles as protectors of Balkan Slavs and Orthodox Christians. This legacy was mostly evident from the 19th century up to the 20th century, ending with the communist regime but reaffirming its role in the 21st century[242]. During the Cold-War, Yugoslavia was a non-aligned country, but major shifts in foreign policy occurred after the dissolution of the country. In 1991 Russia faced the same regional dynamics, suffering from the dissolution of the Soviet State and remaining as the successor. Due to its rigid foreign policy stance, Russia struggled to maintain a consistent approach during the 1990s Balkan wars. Its position shifted over time — from initially supporting the unity of Yugoslavia to supplying arms to Croatia and eventually strengthening ties with Serbia and Serb-populated areas, promoting a narrative of brotherhood rooted in shared religious and cultural identity[243]. Historically, as a result, Russia has created a self-image as Serbia's "natural ally," which shaped Russian policy goals in the region.

Official Russian foreign policy is shaped by the policy documents published mostly after each presidential election. These documents, such as National Security Strategies, Foreign Policy Concepts, and Military Doctrines, speak broadly on national interests and defending them, countering NATO expansion in the "Euro-Atlantic region," but rarely lay great focus on the Western Balkans explicitly. For example, Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept does not single out any Balkan state, not even

[241] James McBride, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans," Council on Foreign Relations, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-influence-balkans (accessed April 25, 2025).
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.

Serbia; instead, it mentions the broader concept of the "Euro-Atlantic area" while denouncing Western interference[244]. According to the neorealist theory, Russia views NATO enlargement toward its southern periphery as a direct threat to its security. Moreover, when the countries in the region moved toward NATO membership, Moscow warned Montenegro and North Macedonia that such actions could escalate tensions and push the situation toward a "new Cold War"[245][246].

Russia's strategic framework, especially since 2014, has been shaped by the Ukrainian crisis, sanctions, and NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Before 2014, the region was seen only through the paradigm of strategic importance as a transportation and energy hub. Post-2014, the cancellation of the South Stream pipeline (2014) reduced Russia's economic focus, shifting priorities to obstructing NATO/EU integration and leveraging ethnic/religious tensions. The Western Balkans is seen as a region where Russia can challenge Western dominance. For example, Russia supports Serbia's position on Kosovo's non-recognition and backs Bosnian Serb leader *Milorad Dodik's* separatist rhetoric to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)[247]. Moreover, according to Russia, the arms race unfolding in the Western Balkans is considered to be driven by Western military aid to NATO members (Albania and Croatia), and aspiring members (*Kosovo). In the majority of the foreign policy concepts, Russia considers Western military aid to Kosovo and NATO members a factor pushing for escalation. The advancements in technologies are indirectly acknowledged in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept. The security risk in these years was Western efforts to overthrow regimes and provoke instability, which Russia applies to the Balkans by supporting anti-Western narratives in Serbia and BiH. Russia's 2021 NSS warns of a global arms race fueled by Western technological advantages and new weapons systems[248]. In a 2023 Foreign Policy concept, Russia was focused on global alliances (e.g., BRICS, SCO), and countering Western dominance. Russia's Balkan strategy is opportunistic, leveraging Serbia and Bosnian Serbs to obstruct NATO/EU integration. Furthermore, Russia supplied

[244] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (approved by President Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016), https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (accessed April 25, 2025).
[245] Voice of America, "The Referendum on North Macedonia's Name Was Legal," 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/the-referendum-north-macedonia-name-legal-fact-check/6742115.html (accessed April 25, 2025).
[246] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Russia Warns Montenegro Over NATO Membership," 2016, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-montenegro-nato-accession/27821224.html (accessed April 25, 2025).
[247] Naim Mahmutaj, "Russian Government Policy in the Western Balkans," in *Securitization and Democracy in Eurasia*, ed. Anja Mihr and Pietro Sorbello (Cham: Springer, 2022), 125–135, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-16659-4_8 (accessed April 25, 2025).
[248] President of Russia, *Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 400 Dated 07/02/2021: On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, 2021, http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046/page/1 (accessed April 25, 2025).

Serbia with new MiG-29 fighter jets after successful negotiations in 2015[249]. Besides the donation of fighters, tanks, and armored vehicles, Russia held joint drills with Serbia in 2019 named "*Slovensko Bratstvo*" (Slavic Brotherhood), resulting in symbolic S-400 deployment. The Ukrainian war made the collaboration difficult, with sanctions disrupting trade, financial flow, and overall Serbia's reliance on Russia. Despite EU threats and sanctions, Serbia maintains neutrality and refuses to impose sanctions on Russia. Apart from broader geopolitical strategy, Russia has been actively using Bosnia's internal divisions to exert influence and block NATO expansion. The Kremlin openly supports the *Republika Srpska* (RS) government's positions—for instance, both Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin have repeatedly backed Milorad Dodik's "strict neutrality" stance for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia has reportedly provided training and support to RS security forces. Observers have accused Russia of helping to create a "Bosnian Serb paramilitary force" capable of destabilizing the country or resisting federal authority[250]. Tensions escalated, especially after disputes between Dodik and the High Representative regarding the limits of international oversight. Following the 2024 UN Resolution on Genocide in Srebrenica—which many Serbs viewed as politically one-sided—Dodik declared that RS would re-establish its own "Army of *Republika Srpska*," a move widely interpreted as provocative. Russia backed Dodik's resistance, criticizing Western governments and their interventions in Bosnia's domestic affairs.

One key element of Russia's engagement in the region has been its use of soft power strategies. The country is using cultural factors to project its influence in the region. Moreover, the Russian state and Orthodox church emphasize pan-Slavic fraternity. Patriarch Kirill, so as the Orthodox Church and many other Russian cultural NGO's have close ties with Serbia and *Republika Srpska* to foster pro-Moscow sentiment[251]. Economically, Russia is leveraging the energy dependence of other countries. For example, Russian gas via the *TurkStream* pipeline supplies all of Serbia's gas, giving Moscow leverage over Serbia's economy and politics[252]. Serbia renewed a multi-year *Gazprom* gas contract in May 2022 at the peak of the Ukrainian war. At the end of 2024, Serbia was accused of having close ties with Russia as an "aggressor" state and "threatened" by the Western allies that it will be a matter of

[249]Airforce Technology, "Serbia Considers Purchase of MiG-29 Fighters from Russia," May 7, 2013, https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/newsserbia-considers-purchase-of-mig-29-fighters-from-russia/ (accessed April 8, 2025).
[250] Foreign Policy, "Putin Is Building a Bosnian Paramilitary Force," August 8, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/08/putin-is-building-a-bosnian-paramilitary-force/ (accessed April 15, 2025).
[251] McBride, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans."
[252] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Russia's Energy Clout in the Balkans Is on Borrowed Time," December 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/12/russias-energy-clout-in-the-balkans-is-on-borrowed-time?lang=en (accessed April 25, 2025).

economic sanctions imposed on its major oil company, "*NIS*"[253]. Even though Serbia is not an official member of the European Union or NATO, alignment with the organizations is strongly required. This energy dominance makes Belgrade tied with Moscow despite EU candidacy. In the media sphere, the Kremlin uses outlets like Sputnik Serbia to promote Russian ideas. NATO questions this narrative, finding that these media emphasize the Balkan as a playground for a clash of interest between East and West[254].

Alongside soft power, Russia uses hard power tools to bind Serbia militarily. Russia supplies and modernizes key parts of Serbia's arsenal, especially after 2014. On multiple occasions, Russia held joint military exercises and programs with the Serbian army. Donations made by Russia were significant for the army's modernization in multiple sectors, mostly by donating MiG-29 fighters and committing dozens of tanks and APCs. In recent years, cooperation has focused on air-defense systems. These actions effectively transfer Russian military influence into Serbia's defense planning. Besides Serbia, Russia provides training to *Republika Srpska's* police forces in counterintelligence, counterterrorism, and internal security. It also supplies *Republika Srpska* with arms deliveries.

Other countries in the region have limited cooperation with Russia due to their alignment within a Western sphere of influence. Historically, before Montenegro's NATO accession in 2017, Russia engaged in limited military and security cooperation, including support for pro-Russian nationalist groups that were allegedly involved in a 2016 coup attempt against the pro-NATO government[255]. Since NATO's accession, direct military cooperation has stopped. NATO members in the region (Albania, North Macedonia, and Croatia) have no military cooperation with Russia.

Regarding the territorial disputes in the region, Russia is using Serbia's example on the *Kosovo issue to back up its position on Crimea. Moscow has consistently sided with Serbia to

[253] Reuters, "Serbia Seeks Sanctions Waiver for US Oil Company NIS Again," March 19, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/serbia-seeks-sanctions-waiver-us-oil-company-nis-again-2025-03-19/ (accessed April 25, 2025).
[254] NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE), *Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkans: Executive Summary*, April 30, 2023, https://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/russias_footprint_in_wb_executive_summary_30-04_v2-2.pdf (accessed April 25, 2025).
[255] Clingendael Institute, *Russian Influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro*, 2023, https://www.clingendael.org/publication/russian-influence-serbia-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-montenegro (accessed April 25, 2025).

maintain the territorial status quo. Russia vetoed or blocked every UN and international move to recognize *Kosovo's 2008 independence, using the issue as a geopolitical lever[256].

These regional motions fit a realist/neorealist model of great-power rivalry and security dilemmas. Russia behaves as a revisionist power seeking regional hegemony: it leverages Serbia's ethnic and religious affinity to project power while opposing NATO's advance to the Balkans as a threat to its sphere. Small Balkan states, caught in this contest, adjust their alliances and militaries accordingly. Analysts observe that great-power competition, not internal Balkan conflicts, is now the primary driver of rearmament. Each external boost – Russian arms to Serbia or Western aid to Croatia/Kosovo – feeds a classic security-dilemma cycle, reducing trust. From a security dilemma viewpoint, Russia's military support makes Serbia feel secure but makes its neighbors feel threatened, compelling them to counter-arm (often with NATO's assistance), which in turn reinforces Serbia's need for Russian support. Ultimately, Russia's mix of soft and hard power has amplified an arms race in the Balkans and complicated any disarmament efforts. The region has become a "*mini cold war*" theater where Russia and NATO both arm and align local actors, ratcheting up instability.

3.4. China's Strategic Influence and Militarization Dynamics in the Western Balkans (2014–2025)

China's approach in projecting influence in the Western Balkans differs from other countries' methods. Power projection in the region started in the last two decades but grew significantly in the 2010s. The crucial part of its power projection has been made through the Belt and Road Initiative, which clearly demonstrates China's engagement in economic matters, focusing on infrastructure, energy, and digital projects[257]. The initiative was announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, aiming to enhance global connectivity through infrastructure. Moreover, China is using multiple initiatives and forums in order to project its influence in the region, e.g., "*16+1/17+1*". China-CEE forums. However, China has limited security cooperation with the countries in the region, besides Serbia. This initial economic partnership has turned into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Besides Serbia, cooperation with other countries has been mostly economic (especially with Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina).

[256] McBride, "Russia's Influence in the Balkans."
[257] Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," February 2, 2023, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative (accessed April 26, 2025).

China's strategy in foreign affairs has evolved in the last three decades, especially after the 1990s. The biggest impact on their foreign policy was the concept of multipolarity and non-alignment policy. This policy has influenced how China views the region through the lens of respect for sovereignty, implicitly opposing Western security blocs, especially concerning the enlargement issue. China's strategic documents, for example, China's National Defense in the New Era, emphasize protecting its interests overseas while avoiding direct alliances[258]. The region itself is viewed as part of a broader "*Eurasian*" order. Therefore, China's approach has been mostly projected through economic ties and soft power (infrastructure, trade, technology transfer) rather than formal security commitments.

China's primary partner in the region has been Serbia, followed by Montenegro, North Macedonia, Croatia, and Albania. However, *Kosovo is not recognized by China. Equivalent to Russia's, China has been using this argument in its non-recognition policy regarding the Taiwan issue. China supports Serbia in international organizations on this matter, since both countries share parallel stances on core sovereignty disputes, with Beijing actively supporting Belgrade's position on *Kosovo in international forums. Likewise, Serbia supports China's One China Policy regarding Taiwan. This mutual solidarity comes from their common rejection of separatist movements and commitment to territorial integrity principles[259]. This approach was established especially after the 1999 NATO bombing of former Yugoslavia, when allies bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Since this tragedy happened, China has framed Kosovo/Taiwan as "precedents against Western hegemony." This Chinese policy has fueled some tensions in the region, especially considering countries recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign state. Serbia is China's top non-Western partner. Beyond solely economic megaprojects planned with Serbia, China has been cooperating with Serbia in the military-tech sector. Serbia was the only country in Europe to acquire Chinese military equipment, including nine Chengdu Pterodactyl-1 (CH-92A) drones in 2019 and FK-3 air defense systems[260]. This has helped Serbia to diversify its procurement policy, not depending solely on Western countries. Both countries hosted joint exercises and signed multiple security agreements. Moreover, China has provided access to drone tech,

[258] State Council Information Office of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 2019, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/specials/whitepaperonnationaldefenseinnewera.pdf (accessed April 26, 2025).
[259] The Diplomat, "The Implications of China-Serbia Relations for Kosovo," December 12, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/the-implications-of-china-serbia-relations-for-kosovo/ (accessed April 26, 2025).
[260] The National Interest, "Dragon Lands in Belgrade: Drivers of the Sino-Serbian Partnership," March 19, 2023, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/dragon-lands-belgrade-drivers-sino-serbian-partnership-201294 (accessed April 26, 2025).

which allowed Serbia to further develop drone production. In recent years, China donated engineering and logistics equipment (€4M in 2019).

Besides Serbia, China is cooperating with Bosnia and Herzegovina, both as the Federation and *Republika Srpska* as entities. As with the Federation, the cooperation between the *Bosniak* and Croat entities has been limited, especially regarding its official Western alignment policy. Most of the cooperation is focused on commercial projects, with no significant security cooperation. With *Republika Srpska*, cooperation has been established mostly on economic matters, financing infrastructure projects, and providing loans. With Montenegro, China has no significant military engagement due to Montenegro's NATO membership. However, it is crucial to emphasize Montenegro's increased debt-to-GDP ratio, with 40% of its external debt owed to China[261]. As for North Macedonia and Albania, similar economic projects exist, although investments regarding security were limited. In contrast, defense cooperation with Croatia is very limited. Croatia, as an EU/NATO member, has not purchased Chinese weapon systems, in part to maintain interoperability and due to security considerations. Yet, China's economic presence and influence in Croatia are increasing; military there have been only minor engagements[262].

Similar to other great powers, China's national security documents do not explicitly mention the Western Balkans, yet they mention the Belt and Road Initiative as a tool to enhance China's global influence, and the Western Balkans align with these goals due to their strategic position in countering Western dominance and due to the European Union's infrastructure needs. Beijing has not surpassed investments made by the European Union, since the EU is leading in absolute numbers; however, this trend is dramatically changing, with a potential shift towards China in the next decade. The Western authority in the region has been challenged by China, which leads to the competition. Western governments increasingly view Chinese activities in the region through the lens of great-power rivalry. The EU and NATO have used different methods of preventing countries in the region from trading with China, warning of excessive dependence on Chinese loans and tech. However, strong opposition exists, even in countries like Serbia, due to the dependence on Chinese resources, since some of the major strategic companies were sold to China, and now Serbia depends on mining deals or surveillance from China. At the same time, while countries depend economically on China, the country seeks

[261] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), *"Kina i Zapadni Balkan: Ko su ključni igrači?"* [*China and the Western Balkans: Who Are the Key Players?*], March 14, 2024, https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kina-zapadni-balkan/33319117.html (accessed April 26, 2025).
[262] China-CEE Institute, Croatia External Relations Briefing.

opportunities to compete with others in arms deals. Even though the plans are not officially proclaimed, the multipolar contest acknowledged by Beijing stresses “win-win cooperation,” but its actions have clear strategic intent, making Beijing the main competitor with Washington and Brussels in the region.

The dynamics explained demonstrate neorealist and security-dilemma logic. In the anarchic regional framework, states (e.g., Serbia) maximize power by cooperating with multiple external partners. China’s involvement, even though not fully military, still affects the balance. When Serbia aligns with China/Russia, Croatia increases its commitment to NATO, which all illustrates Mearsheimer’s fear that any state’s build-up invites counterbalancing. Overall, China’s role in the region reflects great-power competition, driven by power politics. Many critics would argue that, despite Chinese emphasis on peaceful policy and economic prosperity, these activities increase regional militarization and overall dilemma, challenging the existing post-Cold War order.

3.5.European Union Security Strategy and Militarization in the Western Balkans (2014–2025)

The European Union’s engagement in the region began as the response to the Yugoslav conflicts in the 1990s, which posed security threats to Europe’s security. At the end of the decade, in 1999, the first program was launched by the EU, named “Stabilization and Association Process” (SAP), aimed at political, economic, and trade cooperation to stabilize the region and open the way for the countries in the region to join the EU. Moreover, the Stability Pact was introduced, later replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008. The 2000s were crucial years for countries in the region establishing trade liberalization and notable reforms pursuing the goal of reaching European integration. The EU signed Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs) with North Macedonia (2001), Croatia (2005), Albania (2006), Montenegro (2007), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2008), and Serbia (2008). Besides Croatia, no other country in the region has joined the EU due to the slow reforms, political instability, ethnic tensions, and unresolved issues like *Kosovo’s status, despite earlier agreements with the EU.

The European Union’s role in security matters in the region dates to the post-Dayton period when it accepted the functions of NATO in leading the SFOR mission. The EU has led the military peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, EUFOR Althea, since 2004, succeeding NATO’s SFOR. For most of the past decade, EUFOR maintained around 600 soldiers in-country, contributed by

EU members and partners such as Turkey. Notably, in early 2022, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and amid Bosnian Serb separatist rhetoric, EUFOR doubled its troop presence to about 1,100 by deploying reserve forces[263]. Besides its mission in Bosnia, the EU ran a mission in "Kosovo" named EULEX, established in 2008 with an aim to oversee law enforcement and judicial reforms. Meanwhile, the EU continued its Stabilization and Association process with all Western Balkans states that signed SAAs with the organization. Additionally, North Macedonia aligned its foreign and security policy with the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy, joining EU missions (such as the Operation EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and cooperating with the European Defense Agency[264]. The ultimate goal was set in 2003, when the Thessaloniki Declaration was signed, emphasizing that the future goal of the region is within the EU[265].

Practically, the EU's security engagement in the region emphasizes integration rather than rearmament. The organization uses its strategic documents and signs declarations to leverage its enlargement and encourage reforms. Meanwhile, the organization-built law-enforcement capacity to fight organized crime and terrorism (Europol, Frontex). The strategy for the Western Balkans was published in 2018 by the EU Commission, calling for enhanced strategic and operational cooperation on security and other related fields between the EU and Western Balkan governments[266]. Therefore, the EU's role in the region throughout the period from the 2000s until 2014 was primarily peaceful as a peace provider through crisis missions and guiding reform processes.

Due to the international circumstances in 2014, the EU's strategic focus shifted to reflect geopolitical challenges. The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) of 2016 underlined "principled pragmatism" and resilience in the Union's neighborhood. Not a single country from the region was mentioned, yet the region was classified as a part of the EU's neighborhood, where the stability in that region was seen as crucial for the Union's security[267]. The dialogue with the region on security matters was seen as a

[263] Reuters, "Berlin Says It Will Work for EUFOR Bosnia Extension amid Russia Concerns," May 4, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/berlin-says-it-will-work-eufor-bosnia-extension-amid-russia-concerns-2022-05-04/ (accessed April 25, 2025).
[264] Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, "EUFOR Althea Mission," n.d., https://mod.gov.mk/althea-2/ (accessed April 21, 2025).
[265] European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR), *Background*, n.d., https://www.euforbih.org/index.php/en/background (accessed April 26, 2025).
[266] European Commission, *Strategy for the Western Balkans: EU Sets Out New Flagship Initiatives and Support for the Reform-Driven Region*, Press Release IP/18/561, February 6, 2018, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_18_561 (accessed April 27, 2025).
[267] European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced*

priority, and later it was confirmed in the 2018 Commission "Credible Enlargement Perspective". The documents emphasize that the dialogues with Balkan partners would deepen, and their alignment process with EU foreign policy and restrictive measures would accelerate[268]. This policy outlines that within the EU membership, defense cooperation plays a vital role. By joining the Union and accepting the values and goals of the organization, the same values must be shared regarding security and defense matters. However, the defense and security matters until 2018 were mostly associated with capacity-building against organized crime and terrorism.

The EU's foreign policy and security goals have undergone significant changes after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, one month after the invasion, the EU leaders adopted the Strategic Compass for Security and Defense. This represents a five-year action plan to increase the Union's role in defense. One of the priority security concerns in the Compass was the Western Balkans, since the security and stability in the region were still not ensured due to the foreign interference and hybrid threats. The Compass emphasizes the necessity for cooperation with partners (OSCE, NATO, UN) to build civilian and military capacity in the region. For instance, the cooperation between the EU and OSCE in the region was critical for conflict prevention, early warning, and training[269]. In the compass, special attention was paid to cybersecurity, counter-disinformation, and support for counterterrorism in the region. Of special concern for the Western Balkans was the Russian influence, especially if Russia exploits the region's weaknesses. This document was crucial since it was a strategy document by the EU where the Western Balkans were presented as an integral part of Europe's security order, requiring extensive engagement alongside enlargement.

Focusing specifically on the defense industry and capability frameworks in this timeframe, the region has remained outside EU institutional initiatives. The countries in the regions were not members of PESCO (the Permanent Structured Cooperation of EU militaries) or the European Defense Fund (EDF), which are exclusively for EU members. Besides this, the countries in the regions had "Structured Dialogue" arrangements with the European Defense Agency on defense reform. The candidate countries had the chance to participate in certain projects or pooled procurements with some instruments by the EDFs, even if they are not eligible for the EU loans. The 2024 EU Joint White Paper

EU Engagement with the Western Balkans, COM(2018) 65 final, February 6, 2018, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52018DC0065 (accessed April 27, 2025).

[268] Ibid.

[269] Council of the European Union*, A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, March 21, 2022, https://www.strategic-compass-european-union.com/ (accessed April 27, 2025).

on “Defense Readiness 2030” opened the door to joint procurements with “like-minded” partners, which in theory could include Balkan candidates. Within the EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy, Croatia participates in EU Battlegroups and missions (such as EUFOR). It has joined several PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) projects aimed at joint capability development[270]. EU financial instruments aided Croatia’s defense in niche areas; for instance, the EU “*RescEU*” program granted funds for Croatia’s new CL-415 firefighting planes[271]. Croatia’s navy and coast guard modernization (e.g., patrol vessels) also improve maritime security for the EU on the Adriatic. Politically, as an EU member, Croatia aligns with EU positions – including sanctions that curtailed defense trade with Russia after 2014, especially after 2022. While these defense plans have not been extended to the Western Balkans “officially,” the Commission signals a willingness to involve the region as a “meaningful contributor” to European defense initiatives[272].

The EU’s strategic view on the Western Balkans is dual: the region is seen as both an inevitable future member, so a geostrategic investment is crucial for stability, and as a geopolitical frontier, a potential battleground of great powers. The enlargement of the EU is seen only through the lenses of security, while for Russia and others, the enlargement of the EU is equivalent to the enlargement of NATO, both as examples of power projection and changing the international order. The tool the EU is using is pursuit of integration through conditionality, using the promise of EU membership to “force” governments toward reform, security cooperation, and full alignment with EU values.

At the same time, Brussels perceives the Western Balkans as a theater for great-power rivalry. The EU stresses in the Compass that the security of the Union is at stake also in the Western Balkans, since the instability is increasing and external interference (by Russia, China, the U.S., and others) can spill into EU borders. Certainly, great powers outside Europe have been active in the region: Russia supplying arms to Serbia and supporting separatist movements in *Republika Srpska*; China using soft power methods and investing heavily and exporting arms; the U.S. supplying weapons and providing investments in modernization efforts; and Turkey and Gulf States influencing local politics through religion and trade. The goal of the European Union is to integrate the Balkans under Western security

[270] NATO, “NATO and Croatia,” 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48893.htm (accessed April 12, 2025).
[271] European Commission, “*rescEU: The EU Strengthens Its Firefighting Capacities for the Summer*,” 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3546 (accessed April 12, 2025).
[272] European Commission, *White Paper on Defence Readiness, COM(2024) XXX final*, 2024, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/30b50d2c-49aa-4250-9ca6-27a0347cf009_en?filename=White%20Paper.pdf (accessed April 27, 2025).

structures, whether it is within the EU or NATO, to counterbalance those influences. Candidate states are also "required" to align their foreign policies with the Union's in defense matters. For example, Serbia (a formally neutral candidate) has participated in NATO exercises and contributed troops to several missions. However, this effort has not been acknowledged since Serbia has not imposed sanctions on Russia yet. The alignment with the EU's foreign policy is crucial for the organization. The EU tolerates this dual track to an extent, so long as Western Balkan armies can one day be integrated into a Euro-Atlantic security framework. Montenegro has also benefited from EU assistance despite not yet being a member. The EU supported certain capability gaps by financing specific plans. For instance, in 2025, the EU provided a $6 million assistance package to Montenegro for search-and-rescue equipment and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) defense gear[273]. This aid aimed to improve Montenegro's resilience and enhance its ability to contribute to international missions[274]. While relatively modest in scale, such initiatives reflect the EU's broader interest in strengthening security capacity in prospective member states.

Although the EU's emphasis on security cooperation is separated from the political criteria, the "double standard" is emphasized in this approach, excluding the security dimension from the democratic considerations of EU accession. As a matter of fact, some countries slide toward liberalism, and they are still considered as defense partners. In this approach it has become evident that the EU's goal is stability and security provisions, even at the cost of not meeting the democratic criteria. This pragmatic stance reflects realism: EU policymakers prioritize preventing conflict in their backyard over pushing democracy at all costs. This risk emerges if the autocratic regimes are supported and strengthened by being involved in defense projects. Thus, the EU's strategic aim is to lock in the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic security arrangements, using military cooperation as a confidence-building measure and integration incentive, even as deeper political reforms lag.

Notwithstanding, the EU as a bloc is not a major direct arms supplier to the region, but individual member states have exported weapons and military support to the region in recent years. An evident example is the France-Serbia deal on acquiring 12 *Dassault Rafale* fighters in 2024, a contract signed for $2.7 billion. According to Macron's words, this has been a historic shift toward Europe, noting that Serbia has been cooperating heavily with Russia and China but now is making a strategic

[273] European External Action Service (EEAS), "EU Provides €6 Million in Military Support to Montenegro," 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/montenegro/eu-provides-%E2%82%AC6-million-military-support-montenegro_en (accessed April 23, 2025).
[274] Ibid.

long-term choice by partnering with France. This indeed makes Serbia vulnerable in maintaining neutrality in military affairs. Under the contract signed, the maintenance must be done exclusively in France. Moreover, France has implemented safeguards to prevent technology leaks, particularly due to Serbia's ties with Russia and China. Serbia's EU candidacy and France's role in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue likely impose informal constraints to prevent use against Kosovo or NATO allies, aligning with the EU's stabilization goals. In practical terms, this deal entwines Serbia's military with a key EU state: Serbian pilots will be trained in France, and long-term support contracts will keep Serbia linked to the EU's defense industry[275].

Some of the EU's member countries projected their power in the region, often reflecting their national interest instead of the interest of the organization in the first place. France under President Macron has pursued a new strategy for the region, signaling a renewed French interest, aiming to counter external influences and stabilize the region. Historically, France was a major power in the region during the 19th and early 20th centuries, but this influence has faded due to the World Wars and later the Cold War's bipolar structure. However, this changed in 2019 when President Macron visited Belgrade and issued the "French Strategy for the Western Balkans"[276]. The strategy emphasizes France's goal to stabilize the region, promote economic and social development, and strengthen the rule of law, countering external influences that "distract" countries in the region on their pathway toward European integration[277]. The strategy aligns with Macron's broader vision but lacks detailed mechanisms to fully achieve its goals, suggesting it is a "path in the making" rather than a fully formed geostrategy. However, this represents Macron's grand strategy to reform the EU agenda, which seeks a more efficient, less bureaucratic Union[278]. The Western Balkans are a testing ground for Macron's vision of a stronger, autonomous EU capable of countering global powers in a multipolar world. Even though Macron's strategy does not directly include military cooperation in that regard, his actions clearly contradict his strategy. Since in the recent years, France has increased military cooperation in

[275] EUobserver, "Why Is Serbia Buying French Rafale Fighter Jets?," September 20, 2024, https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/arbfbbf2e8 (accessed April 27, 2025).
[276] Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, *France's Strategy for the Western Balkans*, May 2019, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/europe/western-balkans-62918/article/france-s-strategy-for-the-western-balkans (accessed April 27, 2025).
[277] Ibid.
[278] Dejan Jović, "Francuska geostrategija za Zapadni Balkan: trasiran put ili put u nastajanju?" [*French Geostrategy for the Western Balkans: A Mapped Path or Path in the Making?*], *Međunarodni Problemi* 72, no. 3 (2020): 385–410, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347161039_Francuska_geostrategija_za_Zapadni_Balkan_trasiran_put_ili_put_u_nastajanju (accessed April 27, 2025).

the region, notably with Serbia and Croatia. This has become evident by supplying Serbia with Rafale fighters, CASA C-295 transports, and Mistral 3 missiles.

Hungary, under Victor Orban, has followed the opposite direction, deepening ties with Serbia and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and neglecting Brussels guidelines. Orban has vetoed EU statements or sanctions targeting Serbia. Despite critics, Hungary has been donating hundreds of millions of dollars to support Serbs inside Bosnia[279]. Moreover, the deal in 2018 between Hungary and *Republika Srpska's* police included a special police training mission, a move that alarmed Sarajevo. Hungary's alignment with *Dodik* and *Vučić* gives Serbia leverage in Brussels, complicating EU consensus on security. Thus, Hungary, is within the EU, is still weakening collective pressure against Western Balkan autocrats and indirectly fueling the region's militarization (by keeping Serbia resistant to EU arms embargoes). Especially considering the new military alliance signed between Serbia and Hungary[280].

Other members have limited cooperation besides the EU's guidelines. Germany has been the EU's security backbone in the Balkans. Contributed many troops to peacekeeping missions (e.g., to EUFOR Althea). Germany's policy emphasizes the Western Balkans' EU/NATO integration rather than arms sales. Therefore, their arms exports are limited; however, they have patrol boats and light arms to Montenegro and to Bosnia, stressing human rights conditions[281]. Additionally, Italy maintains close relations only with Albania, donating patrol boats and training coast guard units. Greece has historical links with Serbia and North Macedonia; however, arms cooperation remains limited. Slovenia and Austria support Bosnia's territorial integrity but are minor arms players. The net effect is that EU member states are increasingly involved in Balkan security, but often in mismatched ways that reflect their own agendas.

The biggest implications for the Western Balkans were the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the EU's response. According to the strategic documents, especially "Readiness 2030", the EU

[279] Balkan Insight, "Orban's Hungary Gives €100 Million Support to Bosnian Serbs," December 21, 2021, https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs/ (accessed April 27, 2025).
[280] Al Jazeera Balkans, "Srbija i Mađarska potpisale sporazum o saradnji u oblasti odbrane, Vučić najavio i vojni sav*ez*" [*Serbia and Hungary Sign Defense Cooperation Agreement, Vučić Announces Military Alliance*], April 1, 2025, https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2025/4/1/srbija-i-madjarska-potpisale-sporazum-o-saradnji-u-oblasti-odbrane-vucic-najavio-i-vojni-savez (accessed April 27, 2025).
[281] Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK), *Report on Military Equipment Exports 2017*, January 2018, https://www.bmwk.de/Redaktion/EN/Publikationen/Aussenwirtschaft/2017-military-equipment-export-report.pdf (accessed April 27, 2025).

raised the prospect of greater European involvement in its periphery. According to the plans, this move could mobilize up to €800 billion in defense investment across Europe. This plan, which includes a €150 billion loan facility (SAFE instrument) for joint procurement, opens a mechanism by which Western Balkan states, though not eligible for EU loans, could potentially join collective purchases or cooperative projects[282]. For example, Bulgaria has already bought French *Rafales* and *Leopard* 2 tanks, and the Commission's plan envisions "like-minded" candidates (even Turkey and the UK) taking part in procurements alongside EU members. While not explicitly naming the Balkans, this multibillion rearmament effort creates momentum for deeper EU defense collaboration. In practice, Serbia's *Rafale* deal was partly driven by this new European defense market, and it is easy to imagine future Balkan procurements (e.g., Croatia's search for anti-aircraft systems) fitting into pan-European programs.

For the region, this shift means that the EU is no longer passive on defense. Before 2022, the EU's political integration was the primary tool toward liberalization, whereas after 2022, the Union increased its share of national budgets, likely to be spent on European-led military programs. Consequently, the multipolar interactions formed in the region between rival powers fuel a regional security dilemma. The EU's own increased military engagement adds another layer. For instance, when the EU's strategic discourse became openly more militaristic after 2022, Serbia felt pressure to show it could still counterbalance by diversifying suppliers (hence its big Chinese/Russian buys and now EU buys as a hedge). In short, Balkan states face a dilemma: rearm to secure themselves, but every arms purchase unsettles neighbors.

3.6. Turkey's Military and Geopolitical Influence in the Western Balkans (2014–2025)

Turkey's interest in the Western Balkans dates to the Ottoman Empire. After the Cold War and the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Turkey saw an opportunity to project its influence in the divided region and to position itself as a new regional power and protector of Muslim communities. During the war in Bosnia and later in the Kosovo Conflict in 1999, Ankara provided limited military aid within a Western alliance framework[283]. This set the stage for a more independent Turkish role in

[282] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), U*nprecedented Rise in Global Military Expenditure: European and Middle East Spending Surges*, April 28, 2025, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges (accessed April 28, 2025).
[283] Edina Kamenica Rašidagić and Zora Hesova, "Development of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Western Balkans with Focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Croatian International Relations Review* 26, no. 86 (2020): 101, https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/345064 (accessed April 29, 2025).

the 2000s. The historical moment for Turkey's foreign policy was its adopting under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the vision of Foreign Minister (later Prime Minister) *Ahmet Davutoglu*, a Turkish foreign policy approach often described as "*Neo-Ottomanism*." This term is used to describe Turkey's ambition to restore influence in former Ottoman territories by taking advantage of shared history, culture, and religion. *Dušan Tanasković*, a Serbian scholar, explains this macro-ideological platform where modern Turkey, as heir to the Ottoman Empire, seeks a way to restore the entire spiritual, cultural, and political legacy of the Ottoman state and secure a role as a globally significant power in the emerging world order[284]. Turkish officials reject this label; however, the rhetoric of top officials has sometimes demonstrated the opposite. For instance, President *Recep Tayyip Erdogan* in 2013 stated that "*Kosovo is Turkey, and Turkey is Kosovo*", which increased tensions in the region, especially among the Serbian population, who saw it as neo-imperial sentiment[285]. Therefore, this development demonstrates that Turkey views the Balkans as an integral part of its historical sphere, where it has both a duty and a right to be present.

In recent years, Turkey's re-engagement has been more evident in the region. According to the 2001 book "*Strategic Depth*", *Davutoglu* argued that Turkey's geography and its heritage give it a special role in multiple regions, including the Balkans[286]. Initially, the plan was to use soft power tools, like cultural outreach, economic ties, and Islamic solidarity – to complement hard power. Ankara pursued new cooperations in Southeast Europe, which resulted in free trade agreements with Bosnia in 2003, Albania in 2008, Serbia in 2009, and others by 2010. Turkey tried to position itself as a mediator in many regional disputes in order to maintain lasting peace and stability in the region.

The basis of Turkey's influence has been its soft power. Ankara positioned itself as a protector of Muslim heritage in the Balkans. Many activities in the region reflect on this goal; for instance, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which is financing the restoration of Ottoman-era mosques and other monuments. The most visible symbol of Turkey's religious diplomacy is the construction of grand mosques. The result was the biggest mosque in the Balkans, in Albania, opened in 2019[287]. Such activities exemplify Ankara's use of religious and cultural diplomacy in the Balkans.

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[284] Eagle Eye Explore, "Neo-Ottoman: Return of Turkey to Kosovo," February 4, 2025, https://eagleeyeexplore.com/neo-ottoman-return-of-turkey-to-kosovo/ (accessed April 29, 2025); Darko Tanasković, *Neo-Ottomanism: Doctrine and Foreign Policy Practice* (Belgrade: Institute for International Politics and Economics, 2010).
[285] Rašidagić and Hesova, "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Western Balkans.", 113
[286] Ibid.
[287] Anadolu Agency, "Turkey Builds Biggest Mosque of Balkans in Albania," June 4, 2019, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/life/turkey-builds-biggest-mosque-of-balkans-in-albania/1368253 (accessed April 29, 2025).

The grand mosque was opened by Erdogan. During the same visit, Erdoğan pledged to donate Turkish-made military drones to Albania – a striking pairing of mosque diplomacy with security cooperation.

Beyond cultural infrastructure projects, Turkey has extended its power projection by using the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) to train imams, provide religious literature, and even open schools, which all increase pro-Turkey sentiment among local Islamic communities. Turkey often presents itself as a bridge between the West and the Muslim world in Balkan contexts. It has backed EU and NATO integration for Balkan states in its official policy (seeing this as stabilizing), even as it also offers an alternative partnership through bilateral ties[288]. The results are evident in the countries with notable Muslim populations. For instance, in Bosnia, many *Bosniak* politicians consider Ankara as a "big brother." *Kosovo's authorities praise Turkey's friendship and its role in supporting *Kosovo's position in the international community. And in Albania, leaders across the political spectrum acknowledge Turkey as one of the country's key economic partners and allies[289].

Besides soft power, Turkey has been using hard power in the region after 2014 through defense cooperation, military aid, and arms sales. In the potential decrease of the U.S. direct military presence in the region, Ankara is approaching this issue by identifying potential ways to fill this gap, viewing itself as a regional security provider. Turkey has its troops in the majority of the peacekeeping missions in the region. For instance, it has played a crucial part in NATO's KFOR mission in *Kosovo and the EU's missions in Bosnia. Moreover, the cooperation has been extended with the countries in the region through military cooperation agreements. Such agreements are signed with Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia[290]. These agreements cover many areas: joint military drills, exchange of officers, intelligence sharing, logistical support, and cooperation in arms production. Furthermore, Turkey signed a deal with Montenegro in 2018 on defense cooperation to enable joint projects and technology transfers[291]. Turkey was not a major arms supplier to Montenegro before, but with this agreement, it signaled new opportunities for future cooperation. For example, the countries could cooperate on

[288] Rašidagić and Hesova, "Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Western Balkans.", 113-115.
[289] Anadolu Agency, "Biggest Mosque of Balkans."
[290] Nordic Monitor, "Turkey Moves to Ratify Military Agreements with Three Balkan Nations Surrounding Greece," March 31, 2025, https://nordicmonitor.com/2025/03/turkey-moves-to-ratify-military-agreements-with-three-balkan-nations-surrounding-greece/ (accessed April 30, 2025).
[291] Balkan Insight, "Turkey, Montenegro to Enhance Defence Industry Ties," March 26, 2018, https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/26/turkey-montenegro-to-enhance-defence-industry-ties-03-23-2018/ (accessed April 23, 2025).

ammunition production or maintenance services for NATO-standard kit[292]. These agreements represent great ambition by Ankara, effectively aligning those countries' security sectors closer to Turkey.

As a result, Turkey has become an important arms supplier to its Balkan partners. Turkish drone manufacturer *Baykar* has been the most successful in approaching new customers in the region. Its product is the Bayraktar TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicle, a medium-altitude long-endurance drone, famously known and used in conflicts in Syria, Libya, and especially Ukraine. By the early 2020s, Ankara began exporting the Bayraktar TB2 to Balkan states, showcasing Turkey's ability to project power through high-tech weaponry[293]. One of the first countries to acquire this system was Albania. This was not a coincidence, considering long-lasting defense ties with Turkey that started in the 1990s and have been evolving since. Especially over the past decade, the Albania-Turkey defense partnership has grown stronger. Turkey has shared military expertise and conducted joint drills, and in 2021 both countries signed an enhanced defense agreement covering training, logistics, and cyber security cooperation[294]. A clear result was an Albanian's decision to acquire Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles and, later in 2022, sign a deal to acquire *Bayraktar TB2* armed drones[295]. Turkey had expanded its military cooperation with Albania beyond sales, initiating defense industry partnerships that include technology transfer, joint research programs, and potential co-production agreements to strengthen regional capabilities.

*Kosovo followed this example by acquiring these drones, which significantly boosted its capabilities. By late 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina was also in talks to obtain Bayraktar UAVs. These deals emphasize how Turkey's drone diplomacy has reshaped the military balance: as one regional report put it, Serbia now finds itself "surrounded" by Turkish drones in the hands of neighboring states[296].

Beyond drones, Turkey has also been providing other military equipment. A recent cooperation with Bosnia finalized Turkey's €12.3 million worth of arms donations to Bosnia's armed forces[297].

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[292] Ibid.
[293] Balkan Insight, "Wings of Change: Why Armed Drones Are Proliferating in the Western Balkans," July 17, 2023, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/17/wings-of-change-why-armed-drones-are-proliferating-in-western-balkans/ (accessed April 30, 2025).
[294] The Western Balkans, "New Military Alliances Split the Balkans."
[295] Reuters, "Albania Signs Deal to Acquire Three Turkish Bayraktar Drones," December 20, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/albania-signs-deal-acquire-three-turkish-bayraktar-drones-2022-12-20/ (accessed April 16, 2025).
[296] Balkan Insight, "Wings of Change."
[297] Balkan Defence Monitor, Security and Defence Trends, 31.

Additionally, Ankara and Sarajevo signed an updated Military Cooperation Plan in 2023 to guide joint activities[298]. Ankara has remained as one of the most crucial partners for Bosnia, especially since Turkey is a NATO member with historic ties to the country, particularly with the *Bosniak* (Muslim) community. Turkish troops have long participated in peacekeeping missions (EUFOR and previously SFOR), and Ankara has offered multiple rounds of training and military donations[299]. In 2020, BiH and Turkey signed a Security Cooperation Agreement to deepen ties in fighting organized crime and terrorism, which also includes provisions for intelligence sharing, training, and equipment support. While Turkey is not a major arms supplier to Bosnia, it has used soft power and security assistance to build influence, particularly within the Bosnian Army.

For Kosovo, training with the experienced Turkish army has been crucial in overcoming military experience shortfalls. A crucial advance came in December 2024, when the Turkish state-owned defense firm MKE and the government of *Kosovo signed an agreement to establish Kosovo's first ammunition factory[300]. This clearly demonstrates Turkish military outreach, targeting primarily friendly governments while maintaining careful relations with others. Turkey has also deepened military ties with Serbia. In fact, Turkey and Serbia signed a framework military cooperation agreement in 2019 to allow joint exercises and training exchanges[301]. Additionally, Serbia expressed interest in acquiring Bayraktar drones. Some analysts claimed that this Bayraktar drone deal was disrupted due to Turkey's refusal to sell drones to Serbia after having armed *Kosovo[302]. This decision caused frustration in Serbia, which accused Turkey of undermining regional balance, especially after Serbian radar allegedly detected *Kosovo's new Bayraktar TB2s flying near the Serbian-Kosovo boundary in June 2023[303].

[298] Daily Sabah. "Türkiye, Bosnia-Herzegovina Ink Military Cooperation Plan to Boost This." *Daily Sabah*, August 31, 2023. https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkiye-bosnia-herzegovina-ink-military-cooperation-plan (accessed April 30, 2025).
[299] Nordic Monitor. "Turkey–Bosnia Security Agreement Raises Concerns on Rights and Freedoms." *Nordic Monitor*, April 3, 2023. https://nordicmonitor.com/2023/04/turkey-bosnia-security-agreement-raises-concerns-on-rights-and-freedoms/ (accessed April 15, 2025).
[300] Daily Sabah with Agencies. "Kosovo, Türkiye's MKE Ink Deal to Establish Ammunition Factory." *Daily Sabah*, December 18, 2024. https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/kosovo-turkiyes-mke-ink-deal-to-establish-ammunition-factory (accessed April 30, 2025).
[301] Government of the Republic of Serbia. "Serbia, Turkey Sign Several Cooperation Agreements." *Government of Serbia*, October 7, 2019. https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/145995/serbia-turkey-sign-several-cooperation-agreements.php (accessed April 30, 2025).
[302] Nordic Monitor, "Turkey Moves to Ratify Military Agreements."
[303] Ibid.

Turkey's actions in the region since 2014 have had far-reaching consequences for regional security dynamics. By positioning itself as a major supplier of arms and security assistance, Turkey has contributed to a new arms race in the Balkans. The Western Balkans have become the part of Europe where Russia, NATO, China, and Turkey have been competing for power – a mini-Cold War with modern weaponry. In this competition, Turkey is a unique player. A NATO member with a degree of autonomy, maintaining peace in the region, at the same time pursuing its own strategic interests. Western suppliers like the US and EU states have been cautious about introducing high-end weapons into the fragile Balkans, whereas Turkey, projecting its rising defense industry, seized the opportunity. This agility gave Turkey a competitive edge, but it also sparked reactions from other powers.

From a realist perspective, Turkey's actions can be seen as a pursuit of regional influence and power maximization. The Western Balkans, lacking a dominant local power and featuring political vacuums, offered an arena for Turkey to assert itself as a regional leader or even a would-be hegemon. By supplying arms to the allied states (Albania and Bosnia), Turkey created a block of friendly governments that can amplify its strategic reach in Europe's southeast part. However, the region's intricate ethnic divisions and history mean that any one power's gain is often viewed as another's loss, setting off a security dilemma. The "*security dilemma*" theory explains how actions taken by a state to increase its security (e.g., arming an ally) can unintentionally threaten others, who then respond by arming themselves, leading to a spiral of mistrust. This dynamic is plainly visible in the Western Balkans with Turkey's involvement. When Turkey supplied drones and weapons to *Kosovo and Albania, it "deepened the imbalance in the region," raising concern in Belgrade and among Serbs that they were being encircled militarily. Serbia's response was to double down on its own rearmament: Belgrade went on a buying spree, acquiring Russian *Pantsir-S1* air defense systems and Chinese CH-92A combat drones in the same period. Realists would argue that Turkey must carefully calibrate its involvement to avoid triggering a larger confrontation that could undermine its gains. Turkey, by combining soft power and defense diplomacy, has made itself a pivotal regional player. However, these actions have fueled the regional arms race, increasing the security dilemma in the absence of an arms control framework.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the Western Balkans' post-2014 militarization cannot be fully understood without accounting for the strategic role of external actors. The region's security trajectory

was not simply a reflection of domestic needs or isolated national policies, but rather a direct outcome of sustained and increasingly competitive engagement by foreign powers with diverging interests and influence strategies.

NATO and the United States have remained dominant Western actors, reinforcing alliance-building and modernization, particularly in member and aspiring states. Their presence has contributed to stabilizing the region on the surface, but also intensified Serbia's sense of encirclement, deepening the security dilemma. The dual effect of reassurance for some and threat perception for others has exacerbated existing divisions, showing that even stabilizing forces can produce unintended militarizing outcomes.

Russia's approach, in contrast, has been defined by symbolic power and asymmetric tools of influence. By aligning with Serb political actors and leveraging cultural narratives, Moscow has acted as a spoiler of Western integration, offering political and military support as a counterbalance. Despite its limited material leverage, Russia has maintained strategic relevance by exacerbating local grievances and obstructing cohesion within multilateral forums.

China, while less involved in overt military terms, has expanded its presence through strategic partnerships and arms sales - primarily with Serbia. Its support for Serbia's territorial positions and investment in surveillance technology represent an emerging security dimension of its broader economic footprint. As such, China's involvement contributes to Serbia's strategic diversification and indirectly feeds regional mistrust.

The European Union, though the most invested in long-term stability, remains hampered by internal divisions and competing national interests. Its efforts to act as a normative power are weakened by inconsistent arms policies and a lack of hard power capabilities. While it remains a critical factor in funding and political dialogue, the EU has yet to consolidate its role as a credible security guarantor.

Turkey's growing presence reflects a hybrid strategy combining historical-cultural ties with assertive defense diplomacy. While Ankara's support of NATO goals aligns it with the West in formal terms, its bilateral arms transfers, and religious soft power have added a new layer to the region's fragmentation. Turkey's role exemplifies how non-Western powers can compete within the same security landscape, amplifying militarization trends.

Overall, this chapter concludes that the militarization of the Western Balkans is not the product of internal insecurity alone but is significantly shaped - if not driven - by the cumulative and conflicting agendas of external powers. The result is a crowded strategic environment where states are simultaneously recipients of security assistance and objects of geopolitical rivalry. These dynamics entrench the logic of the security dilemma and make cooperative regional security increasingly difficult to achieve without a recalibration of external engagement. As the following chapters propose potential frameworks for arms control and confidence-building, the insights from Chapter 3 highlight the need for any regional solution to actively account for, manage, and constrain foreign influence rather than ignore or sidestep it.

Chapter IV - Geopolitical Dynamics and Security Outlook in the Western Balkans

4.1. Rising Nationalism and Its Impact on Security Policies

The geopolitical turmoil since 2014, marked by renewed great-power competition, regional conflicts, and institutional instability – all taken into consideration – has fueled nationalist-populist movements across the globe, with the Western Balkans presenting a critical case study. The region's fragile states, unresolved conflicts and ethnic tensions, and stalled EU integration process have made it particularly vulnerable to these trends. Political leaders in Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Montenegro increasingly exploit ethnic tensions and economic frustration to gather support. One study emphasizes that "rising nationalism," mixed with high unemployment of youth and low trust in institutions, characterizes the region's post-conflict landscape[304]. Moreover, public support for EU integration has lost momentum in some countries, losing confidence in international actors[305]. In some cases, politicians use nationalist rhetoric to remain in power and to gain greater "freedom" in "ruling" the country, all by channeling public discontent[306]. Especially in this context, deeply rooted war-era narratives and socio-economic hardships are being adjusted and presented as issues of national security. Far-right and nationalist parties and coalitions have gained influence, often promoting ideas of defending their ethnic "nation" against perceived external threats (e.g., NATO, the EU, or rival ethnic groups from neighboring countries). This narrative is commonly used to justify arms procurement and modernization efforts. The interplay of delayed reforms, high corruption, and delayed EU accession or a slowed process of integration within the EU has fueled a turn towards identity nationalist politics and distrust in partners.

The supremacy of nationalist agendas has directly shaped defense postures and security policymaking in the region in the last decade. Governments in the region under nationalist pressure have allocated larger budgets to military and defense modernization, raising concerns about

[304] Humanity in Action, *Supporting Democratization and Reconciliation Process in the Western Balkans*, n.d., https://humanityinaction.org/supporting-democratization-and-reconciliation-process-in-the-western-balkans/ (accessed May 3, 2025).
[305] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *What Has Stopped EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans?,* 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/06/what-has-stopped-eu-enlargement-in-the-western-balkans (accessed May 3, 2025).
[306] Ibid.

sovereignty threats and historical rights. For example, the government in Albania and the *Kosovo have undergone significant modernization efforts to protect their citizenship against Serbian threats in Kosovo. Correspondingly, Serbia's leadership has pursued ambitious modernization to protect Serb interests in *Kosovo and the region. Both countries resulted in increased defense spending, funding purchases like Russian *Pantsir-S1* air defenses for Serbia and Turkish *Bayraktar TB2* drones or American *Javelin* anti-tank missiles for Albania. These acquisitions were justified as necessary to protect citizens and to protect sovereignty against foreign threats. Furthermore, Croatia's nationalist leadership under *Zoran Milanovic* made nationalist concerns over Serbian intentions, which have similarly reinforced an expensive arms buildup (F-16 fighters, *Dassault Rafale* fighters). The trend shows that across the region, militaries and paramilitaries that had been downsized or dissolved after the wars are now being modernized or restored[307]. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethno-nationalist leaders have openly resisted any limitation on entity arming or consent to state-level reforms. For example, Bosnian Serb leader *Milorad Dodik* has explicitly stated that he is against BiH membership in NATO and threatened a secession referendum[308]. While identically, former Bosniak member of the tripartite system Bakir Izetbegovic has advocated for a centralized BiH, criticized the Dayton Peace Agreement, used nationalist rhetoric promoting the idea of a unified Bosnia under *Bosniak* leadership, and, similar to *Dodik*, multiple times rejected electoral reforms[309]. Croat nationalists in Bosnia likewise demand special status and greater autonomy for the Croat community[310]. Therefore, it is evident that nationalist parties pressure governments to treat historical disputes and territorial issues as security imperatives. Commonly, this means rejecting international arbitration/mediation or rulings: *Kosovo's independence remains non-negotiable for Belgrade, and tripartite leadership in Bosnia dismisses attempts by foreign countries or international courts to undermine their autonomy. By portraying such issues as existential, nationalist narratives justify the army's modernization and create popular resistance to compromise.

[307] International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Western Balkans: Controlled Instability, Armed Conflict Survey* 2024, https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2024/the-western-balkans-controlled-instability/ (accessed May 4, 2025).
[308] Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), *Friends Like These: Orbán's Balkan Allies*, 2024, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/friends-these-orbans-balkan-allies (accessed May 4, 2025).
[309] *Oslobođenje, "Izetbegović: Stranci su nas prisilili da u Dejtonu napravimo monstruma koji ne može funkcionisati bez njih,*" 2024, https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/izetbegovic-stranci-su-nas-prisilili-da-u-dejtonu-napravimo-monstruma-koji-ne-moze-funkcionisati-bez-njih-1001383/ (accessed May 4, 2025).
[310] TRT World, "Croat and Serb Nationalism Threatens Bosnia, but No One Is Paying Attention," 2019, https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/croat-and-serb-nationalism-threatens-bosnia-but-no-one-is-paying-attention-23405 (accessed May 4, 2025).

However, it is worth emphasizing the fact that most of the nationalist leaders in the region are presented as democratic reformers, aligning rhetorically with liberal-democratic values. However, the common feature that they share is populist rhetoric, attacking political opponents and appealing to domestic frustrations over corruption, inflation, and labor shortages. Consistently portraying themselves as defenders of national interest against external influence, aligning with nationalist rhetoric. Although in most of the countries in the region, presidents have a ceremonial role, largely symbolic, most of the leaders avoid restrictions of their role in areas like foreign policy, defense, and security.

Noteworthy, reports on international democracy indexes show that the majority of the states in the region demonstrate persistent deficiencies in democratic governance. According to the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit, the regional states are classified as "Flawed Democracies," except for BiH, which is categorized as a "Hybrid Regime"[311]. Similarly, the Democracy Matrix ranks Serbia as a "Moderate Autocracy," while most other countries fall under the category of "Deficient Democracies," with Bosnia and Montenegro again identified as "Hybrid Regimes"[312]. Furthermore, the Fragile States Index labels Serbia and Bosnia as countries in the "Warning" category, suggesting a notable degree of political instability. These classifications collectively indicate that, despite formal adherence to democratic frameworks, the region continues to face significant democratic backsliding and institutional fragility[313].

Local nationalist movements are also stimulated and influenced by a similar transnational network of movements. Globally, and especially evident in Europe, right-wing populists and nationalists see the Balkans as part of a shared cultural struggle. Hungary's Prime Minister *Viktor Orban* has strengthened relations with nationalist movements in the region. Orban has officially supported leadership in *Republika Srpska* and opposed EU sanctions on Dodik[314]. Notably, many European countries have been facing the rise of far-right political parties in recent years. In France, MEPs Marine Le Pen's National Rally, AfD in Germany second largest party), the Netherlands' Party for Freedom, and Poland's Law and Justice. All these parties with considerable influence within their

[311] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024*, 2024, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/ (accessed May 4, 2025).
[312] Democracy Matrix, *Democracy Matrix Ranking*, 2020, https://www.democracymatrix.com/ranking (accessed May 4, 2025).
[313] Fund for Peace, *Fragile States Index Heat Map*, 2024, https://fragilestatesindex.org/analytics/fsi-heat-map/ (accessed May 4, 2025).
[314] RUSI, *Orbán's Balkan Allies*.

countries share similar political stances on anti-immigrant policies, mostly Eurosceptic or Islamophobic, with varying degrees of extremism and influence. In the U.S., "America First" rhetoric by Donald Trump has increased skepticism of Western institutions by demanding military cost-sharing, criticizing NATO, and other European organizations. Nevertheless, the global rise of ethno-nationalism—from Orbán and Le Pen in Europe to Trump and populists elsewhere—provides a favorable backdrop for Balkan nationalists, who draw on these networks to legitimize their positions and seek backing against integration pressures.

The foreign actors have had a major influence on the nationalist movements in the region. The major issue is that some foreign actors have been shaping their trajectories by selectively backing certain claims or not criticizing some backed by hatred. For example, Croatia has proudly celebrated its *Ustaše* roots during national holidays, including burning effigies named after Serbian and Russian leaders, yet Western allies dismiss criticism of these acts, even though Croatia is a member of the EU&NATO. Similarly, *Kosovo's celebrations of its army, tied to the 1999 KLA's terrorist past, are framed as historical pride, despite their divisive impact. This inconsistent approach, where certain nationalist displays are tolerated while others are condemned, exposes hypocrisy and risks fueling far-right ideologies, further destabilizing the region.

The mutual rise of nationalism across the Western Balkans has reinforced a regional arms race and deepened the classic security dilemma. Each state claims its modernization is defensive, but neighbors perceive them as a threat. Besides modern weaponry acquisitions, even clearly defensive upgrades (like Serbia's air defense) are interpreted as provocations. Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a country that cannot agree on a unified defense budget or procurement due to ethno-political division. Instead, each entity undertakes uniform decisions, fearing others. Under this nationalist logic, every armament feeds a narrative of danger. This race in turn exacerbates insecurity: no side feels safer, so the spiral continues.

The neorealist theory explains these developments. In Waltz's theory, the absence of higher authority means the state can rely only on themselves. In order to ensure its own survival, safety is the primary interest of the state. Especially when nationalist sentiments mix with the anarchic structure of international relations, threat perceptions are increased. Leaders treat neighboring states and international organizations as potential enemies, justifying power-maximization policies. Jervis's insights further apply when offense and defense are hard to distinguish and trust is low; even routine

military steps trigger fear. In the Western Balkans, nationalist narratives often present territorial issues as existential threats, demanding extraordinary measures, which are usually security spending and hardline diplomacy. Consecutively, realism predicts that this mutual antagonism will lead to competitive armaments, as each state seeks relative advantage[315].

4.2. Unresolved Tensions and Risk of Future Conflicts in the Western Balkans

The unresolved status of *Kosovo remains a significant contemporary conflict with the potential to undermine peace and stability in the Western Balkans. Serbia considers Kosovo as its sovereign territory, more accurately, sovereign province in the south, according to the Serbian Law and Constitution. Serbia has not recognized its 2008 independence, and any move made by Pristina usually is considered a security challenge[316]. According to the Serbian government, Kosovo's refusal to grant autonomy to its ethnic autochthonous Serbian population has been one of the biggest issues in reducing tensions. Essentially, *Kosovo's status cannot be updated, since Serbia refuses to recognize its independence, which is blocking their membership in international organizations like the United Nations and the European Union[317]. The biggest shift occurred when *Albin Kurti* came to power in 2021, enforcing its authority in northern Kosovo by deploying large militarized special forces to the province. *Albin Kurti's* unilateral decisions have been violating resolutions by the UN Security Council, such as Resolution 1244 from 1999. Moreover, under the Resolution 1244, military or paramilitary groups like the *Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) had to be demilitarized. However, by militarizing and deploying special military and police forces in the province, the requirement has been violated[318]. Additionally, unilateral actions, such as banning Serbian license plates and deploying special police in Serb-majority northern Kosovo without KFOR coordination, disrupt the resolution's call for a peaceful environment and UNMIK's interim administration[319].

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[315] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics;* Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.
[316] Reuters, "Serbia Says Drones Enter Its Airspace from Kosovo amid Rise in Tensions," November 2, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-says-drones-enter-its-airspace-kosovo-amid-rise-tensions-2022-11-02/ (accessed May 5, 2025).
[317] International Crisis Group, *Toward Normal Relations between Kosovo and Serbia*, 2023, https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo-serbia/toward-normal-relations-between-kosovo-and-serbia (accessed May 5, 2025).
[318] United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1244* (1999), https://unmik.unmissions.org/united-nations-resolution-1244 (accessed May 5, 2025).
[319] Ibid.

Originally, negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo were conducted under the UN framework, primarily through UN SC Resolution 1244. However, Serbia's government agreed to move on to the talks with mediation by EU representatives. This was a crucial move, since it has not led to the regulation; moreover, it has led to further escalation. Since the UN was seen as a more neutral mediator, negotiating under Resolution 1244 as a legal framework. Nowadays, under the EU mediation, twenty-two of its twenty-seven member states recognize Kosovo's independence, and one of the crucial obstacles for Serbia's accession to the EU has been the recognition of *Kosovo. This shift raised concerns in Serbia that the EU might favor *Kosovo's statehood, undermining Serbia's position. The EU-led dialogue, starting with the 2013 Brussels Agreement, focuses on "normalization of relations" without explicitly referencing 1244. Serbia's agreement to EU mediation, driven by its EU accession ambitions, has been criticized domestically as a concession to Western pressure. The EU's mediation has produced agreements like the Brussels Agreement and the 2023 *Ohrid* Agreement, but implementation has failed, partly due to actions by Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti (e.g., delaying the Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities) and Serbia's unwillingness to fully normalize relations[320]. Serbia feels pressured by the EU to make concessions for EU membership, while *Kosovo faces less consistent pressure, creating an uneven dynamic that frustrates Serbian negotiators.

Meanwhile, border incidents and low-intensity clashes keep tensions alive: for example, at the end of 2022, Serbia's border army eliminated fighter jets after unidentified drones observed Serbian army positions near the "border" with *Kosovo[321]. Kosovo denied any involvement in these actions, explaining that these allegations made by Serbia are attempts used by Serbia to justify troop mobilization. An additional problem occurred when the ethnic Serb villages in North Kosovo built barricades in protest over license-plate laws banning the registration of Serbian plates in Kosovo. Once more, Serbia put its troops on high alert. In order to avoid unrest, the law enforcement of vehicle registration has been delayed; however, the tension has increased once again. Each outbreak of new tensions feeds mutual mistrust, both parts emphasizing their "victimhood" and insisting on sovereignty and pointing to minority rights. This unresolved dispute is universally used by external actors in their power projection in the region; by supporting one side in the conflict, they present themselves as peacemakers to mitigate tensions. Their involvement serves to project influence and advance strategic interests, overshadowing genuine efforts to resolve issues. For example, the EU/US warned Serbia

[320] EU News, "Ohrid Agreement: Serbia and Kosovo One Year Later," March 18, 2024, https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/03/18/ohrid-agreement-serbia-kosovo/ (accessed May 5, 2025)
[321] EU News, "Ohrid Agreement."

against military threats and supported Kosovo's independence, while Russia accused Kosovo of aggression. These unresolved issues are highly threatening for peace in the region; generally small local provocations can spark wider crises. For example, the *Banjska* monastery incident in 2023, when the armed locals killed a Kosovar police officer, dramatically escalating tensions.

Another longstanding historical dispute, rooted in the way back before the Yugoslav wars and contemporary unresolved border issues, persists between Serbia and Croatia, complicating their bilateral relations. After the conflict in the 1990s, Serbia and Croatia still have not settled the dispute over the long-running Danube River boundary (Serbia claims the midstream thalweg, and Croatia claims the 19th-century cadastral border)[322]. This dispute has caused multiple incidents and diplomatic disputes (for example, clashes over navigation rights, minor patrol incidents, and cadastral records). This territorial dispute is mixed with a bitter historical memory. Croatia annually celebrates Operation Storm (August 1995) as a liberation of occupied territories, with many ceremonies across the country. Additionally, commemorative events are held on disputed territory along the Danube River. In 2025, President *Zoran Milanović* announced plans to mark Operation Storm with a military parade. In contrast, Serbian media and politicians strongly protest these events, since they represent a national tragedy that caused a refugee exodus of more than 500,000 people and many civilian deaths[323]. These sentiments are still enjoying public support in Croatia. In Croatia's recent elections (April 2024), the majority of the parties used anti-Serb rhetoric to gain support from voters, often promoting nationalist ideas targeting the Serb minority[324]. In turn, some Serbian politicians continue to refer to *Ustaše*-era genocides (such as *Jasenovac*) to warn Croats not to revive aggressive nationalism. Despite Croatia's membership in NATO and the EU and Serbia's pursuit of EU integration, the legacy of the 1990s conflict continues to shape and strain their bilateral relations. Each country's military's modernization is presented as strongly defensive, although some acquisitions show the opposite. Both Serbia and Croatia are leading countries in the region regarding military modernization; therefore, strained relations keep heating up tensions in the region, pushing for an arms race.

[322] China-CEE Institute, *Croatia External Relations Briefing: Border Disputes of Croatia with Its Neighbors*, July 2, 2019, https://china-cee.eu/2019/07/02/croatia-external-relations-briefing-border-disputes-of-croatia-with-its-neighbors/ (accessed May 5, 2025).
[323] Balkan Insight, "Croatian, Serbian Media Echo State Narratives About Operation Storm," August 3, 2023, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/08/03/croatian-serbian-media-echo-state-narratives-about-operation-storm/ (accessed May 5, 2025).
[324] Balkan Insight, "Croatian Election Campaign Haunted by Anti-Serb Rhetoric," June 18, 2020, https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/18/croatian-election-campaign-haunted-by-anti-serb-rhetoric/ (accessed May 5, 2025).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is another source of instability in the region. The Dayton Peace Accords of 1995 created a complex tripartite state and two largely mono-ethnic entities. It technically ended the war, but the guarantees presented in the Dayton Accords are now being challenged. In recent years, Serb and Croat entities were both undermining central institutions, with notable efforts undertaken by *Milorad Dodik*. RS officials have passed local laws to claim control of state-owned land and resources. The UN-appointed High Representative (OHR) imposed a ban on genocide denial and war crimes glorification in 2021, and RS politicians threatened to pull RS officials out of Bosnia's army, judiciary, and tax system[325]. However, it is worth emphasizing the fact that his law is highly politicized and in favor of the one entity within Bosnia, targeting another, acknowledging one's side casualties, and neglecting others. Moreover, the law imposed by the High Representative is against Annex X that defines its role[326]. Especially after the recent UN vote on genocide in *Srebrenica* in 2024, *Dodik* has even explicitly stated about the formal secession of RS. These moves heighten tensions among three entities. Bosnian Croats also at times express distrust; for example, they complain that in the *Bosniak*-majority Federation, their political weight has eroded, demanding constitutional reforms or a separate Croat entity (though these demands are contested and less internationally visible). The state is under major crisis and international pressure; mutual vetoes are frequently used in the presidency or parliament and budget stalls. The role of the High Representative was initially established to prevent the collapse of the Dayton Accords; however, it has only heightened the tensions. Additionally, the role of the NATO/EU troop in Bosnia, according to the Bonn powers, faces erosion. In summary, Bosnia's ethnic composition means that any sign of external or internal pressure can inflame separatist rhetoric.

Beyond critical core disputes risking peace in the region, several acute issues remain significant in the Western Balkans. Albania and Montenegro signed a treaty to enhance cross-border cooperation in 2016 (Lake *Skadar*), but it was highly controversial in Albania, with low public support fueled by nationalist sentiments that this deal might be in favor of Montenegro[327]. One of the main motives behind this nationalist rhetoric and sentiment has been the idea of "Great Albania"; therefore, nationalism in general has cross-border effects, especially considering Albanians nowadays constitute a significant part in North Macedonia, and a majority in Kosovo, and a considerable number in

[325] House of Lords Library*, Western Balkans and the Dayton Peace Agreement*, 2023, https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/western-balkans-and-the-dayton-peace-agreement/ (accessed May 5, 2025).
[326] Office of the High Representative, *General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Annex 10 – Agreement on Civilian Implementation*, 1995, https://www.ohr.int/dayton-peace-agreement/annex-10/ (accessed May 5, 2025).
[327] Ibid.

Montenegro. Therefore, Albania, following its policy of establishing a strong and great country in the region, poses a threat to peace in the Western Balkans, since this territory would potentially include the eastern part of Montenegro, the western part of North Macedonia, the western part of Greece, and the southern part of Serbia[328]. The idea is highly rejected by the Albanian government; however, a few steps have been undertaken. For example, Albania drafted an agreement between Pristina and Tirana on their border to be considered as an internal boundary; therefore, the border in its traditional form will not exist. In North Macedonia, the issue became evident in the 2001 insurgency, which resulted in the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the persistence of ethnocentric parties. Nowadays, North Macedonia has a few Albanian parties. As of the 2020 election, the Albanian parties collectively secured 20% of the vote, which reflects their growing influence[329].

Another obstacle in the region has been the Bulgaria-North Macedonia dispute. Bulgaria has repeatedly blocked Skopje's EU accession over issues of national identity. Bulgaria demanded that Skopje recognize a Bulgarian minority and acknowledge shared history. Historically, Bulgaria claims that North Macedonia's language and national identity are rooted in Bulgarian history. Each dispute, whether about passport recognition, cultural history, or customs unions, has the potential to spark diplomatic crises and can strain regional relations beyond bilateral lines.

All these core disputes in the region have further amplified military imbalances and frequent low-level incidents. Serbia has the largest army in the region, Croatia modernized but smaller army, and Albania has a medium-sized but not modernized army, while other neighbors (North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro) have much smaller forces. The arms race enacted after 2014 often seems reactive. Although small sparks and low-level incidents, it has outsized significance and potentially bigger impact. Recent events in relations between Belgrade and Pristina regarding the license plate issue or the drone episode led to Serbia mobilizing its forces on the borders. Besides these major events, small clashes occasionally erupt in the region, mostly related to border issues. Nevertheless, every incident risks a chain reaction in this hostile environment; for example, when Sarajevo briefly launched border cameras in 2018, Serbia protested as if it were a hostile act. Without a binding regional arms control or conflict prevention regime (Dayton's original military limitations have

[328] George Gavrilis, **The Making of a Greater Albania?** (New York: Columbia International Affairs Online, 1996), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/conf/iec03/iec03_15-96.html (accessed May 6, 2025).
[329] European Movement – *North Macedonia, Review of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections in North Macedonia*, 2020, https://europeanmovement.eu/member-update/em-north-macedonia-review-of-the-2020-parliamentary-elections-in-north-macedonia/ (accessed May 6, 2025).

long since been outgrown), each country's troop movements and exercises are viewed through a lens of suspicion.

It is worth emphasizing the fact that throughout history, the region has consistently been intertwined with broader geopolitical developments, shaping regional and global security dynamics. Such unresolved disputes in the region can reflect on the broader scale, transmitting tensions in the continent or even globally. Notably, the Western Balkans have always been a region of global developments, sometimes even a major cause of global disputes (like World War I), so stability in the region must be imperative for global powers intertwining and projecting influence in the region. Amid multiple ongoing regional conflicts, including the Ukrainian war since 2022, the conflict in Gaza, occasional Iran/Israel tensions, and the recent conflict between India and Pakistan, ensuring security in the Balkans, Europe's "heart," is critical. A second conflict on European soil could ignite regional tensions, potentially triggering a wider war.

From a conceptual standpoint, the Western Balkan security environment represents a classic security dilemma of realist international relations. Therefore, each defensive measure undertaken by one side due to the unresolved claims and historical hostile relations is interpreted as offensive by the other. In short, the persistence of ethnic territorial disputes, coupled with mutual fear and nationalistic mobilization, creates an environment vulnerable to conflict. This makes long-term stability in the region uncertain unless these core issues are finally addressed.

4.3.Emerging Threats and Technology Advancements

Besides nationalist movements and unresolved tension, technological advancements have amplified the arms race, with the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber tools to unmanned drones and surveillance systems—all that goes beyond the existing security framework and control regimes from the 1990s. The established security framework under the Florence Agreement (Article IV of Dayton) of 1996 had been successful in preserving the balance of power in the Balkans for nearly three decades. However, without provisions for AI-enabled weapons, cyber warfare, or autonomous drones, this established framework becomes outdated. Emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) have the potential to fully destabilize the region. The great advantage of EDTs is that they can confer first-strike advantages, undermine numerical restrictions, go undetected, and

neutralize existing weapon stockpiles[330]. Especially without the security framework and modernizing army with EDTs, this feeds the classic security dilemma: one state's effort to increase security (investing in EDTs) makes its neighbors feel less secure, prompting reciprocal modernizations. Political scientists emphasize that each major weapons innovation – from radar to nuclear missiles – has historically "compounded the security dilemma" by creating uncertainty about how rivals will use new tools[331]. As a result, in the region nowadays, even apparent defensive technologies may alarm neighbors unless transparently regulated.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has had the most significant impact among emerging and disruptive technologies in reshaping security dynamics. AI is being integrated across defense sectors – from target recognition and autonomous weapon systems to command-and-control, and logistics[332]. Specifically, AI can act as an enhancing component, as it can enhance precision, speed of decision-making and efficiency. The biggest issue of AI advancement is that this field, especially militarily, is uncertain how it will behave, since the adversarial hacking of AI algorithms creates new vulnerabilities. Moreover, cyber tools have become commonly used weapons. Recent reports document a surge of cyberattacks in the Western Balkans – for example, over 1.2 million personal records were exposed, and ransomware incidents rose roughly 200% in just two years, often aimed at critical infrastructure, businesses, and government networks[333]. Cyber terrorists and attackers have exploited ethnic and political narratives in the region, spreading disinformation and phishing to undermine trust and destabilize institutions. Especially, reaction time in cyberattacks is crucial in order to stabilize the situation and to keep it under control. However, with advancements and more complex attacks, the reaction time in the region where the emerging technologies are still developing is usually lacking. In summary, AI and cyber capabilities often blur the lines between offense and defense, considering their dual use. They are hard to control and to predict the outcomes of the actions; therefore, they amplify the insecurity that drives arms competition.

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[330] *Miloš Jevtić and Marina Kostić Šulejić*, "Emerging and Disruptive Technologies in the Western Balkans: Do We Need a New Arms Control Regime?" *Međunarodni Problemi* 75, no. 2 (2023): 217, https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2302237J (accessed May 6, 2025).
[331] Brookings Institution, "Artificial Intelligence and the Security Dilemma," 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/artificial-intelligence-and-the-security-dilemma/ (accessed May 6, 2025).
[332] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Governing Military AI Amid a Geopolitical Minefield*, July 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/governing-military-ai-amid-a-geopolitical-minefield?lang=en&center=europe (accessed May 6, 2025).
[333] Atlantic Council, *How Do Cyber Attacks Threaten the Balkans? A Debrief with Dan Ilazi and Filip Stojanovski*, 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/balkans-debrief/how-do-cyber-attacks-threaten-the-balkans-a-debrief-with-dan-ilazi-and-filip-stojanovski/ (accessed May 6, 2025).

Unmanned aerial and autonomous weapons are massively proliferating in and beyond the region since they present an affordable force multiplier. In recent years, Balkan leaders showed special interest in combat drones' acquisitions to boost military capabilities at relatively low cost[334]. In practice, Balkan states began procurement of armed UAVs from foreign partners: for example, Serbia's air force has been modernized in this area by Chinese manufacturers, while Croatia partnered with the U.S., and meanwhile others mostly acquired UAVs from Turkey. These drones do not represent mere technical novelties. Field reports from Nagorny-Karabakh and the Ukraine war confirm that even inexpensive ones (such as kamikaze) can destroy much more expensive weapons, for instance, tanks, artillery, and fortified positions[335]. Even though the current Balkan defense posture regarding drones remains modest, acceleration of procurement could quickly spark a new arms race in this field. Certainly, drone proliferation has already become a regional flashpoint. For example, this has become evident when Turkey rejected exporting Bayraktars in 2023 to Serbia, delivering the same drones to Kosovo. This example illustrates how asymmetric adoption of advanced systems can heighten distrust. An expert suggests that Balkan states today race "against themselves to lock deals on drones" in order to avoid falling behind technologically[336].

Governments across the Western Balkans are also deploying advanced surveillance technologies and engaging in hybrid tactics that transcend conventional battlefields. Human rights monitors note an expanding use of biometric surveillance and facial-recognition cameras in Albania, Montenegro, and Serbia[337]. These systems have been installed under the claim of public safety, yet they enable pervasive monitoring of citizens and can be turned against political opponents. In fact, media reports show Western Balkan regimes using digital spying and data analytics to harass journalists, civil society activists, and opposition figures. For example, Serbia's surveillance network (including social media monitoring and phone interception) has been linked to targeted attacks on opposition politicians and journalists. The unilateral use of such tools for surveillance increases suspicion across borders: one state's mass surveillance can appear as preparation for informational or cyber warfare against its neighbors. Simultaneously, broader "hybrid" strategies have grown as state and non-state actors

[334] Balkan Insight, "Wings of Change: Why Armed Drones Are Proliferating in the Western Balkans," July 17, 2023, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/17/wings-of-change-why-armed-drones-are-proliferating-in-western-balkans/ (accessed May 6, 2025).
[335] *Jevtić and Kostić Šulejić*, "Emerging and Disruptive Technologies," 219.
[336] Jevtić and Kostić Šulejić, "Emerging and Disruptive Technologies," 226
[337] IntelliNews, *Western Balkan States Increase Use of Surveillance, Censorship to Suppress Opponents*, 2025, https://www.intellinews.com/western-balkan-states-increase-use-of-surveillance-censorship-to-suppress-opponents-378757/ (accessed May 6, 2025).

(notably Russia, China, and the US) use cyber intrusions, disinformation campaigns, and economic pressure as informal means of influence. A NATO-affiliated study notes that countries like Montenegro and Albania suffered significant cyber intrusions in 2022, and EU analysts identify Russia as "the foremost pursuer and beneficiary of hybrid operations in the Western Balkans" in recent years[338]. Thus, the region's security environment has become multidimensional: military competition now interlocks with cyber threats, propaganda, and secret technologies, amplifying strategic instability[339].

These new capabilities are fueled by the same competitive logic described in neorealist theory. Each state's attempts to employ AI, drones, or cyber weapons are defensible, but the drive to arm or upgrade rivals will always raise a concern. As scholars note, every new weapon technology "creates uncertainty about military capabilities", compounding the security dilemma all states experience (Brookings Institution, 2018). In the case of the Western Balkans, where deep historical grievances have made trust very difficult, this problem is magnified. Effectively, an antiquated arms-control regime in the region is compounded with a quickening diffusion of new arms, linking local geopolitics to a larger contest between great powers. Emerging threats such as automated drones and AI have more than increased the category of arms; they have created new vulnerabilities and escalatory routes (a cyber assault on an adversary's command and control could lead to a real military response, for example). Collectively it increases strategic instability; rapid arsenal builds, and covert purchases (for instance, satellite-enabled drones or spyware) could precipitate a crisis before norms have a chance to catch up. In conclusion, technological change has extended the arms race in the Western Balkans from tanks to AI; while deepening conventional security rivalries, it has opened entirely new avenues of competition.

4.4.International Mediation and External Influences

The ongoing presence of these regional threats raises a question about the efficacy of international mediation and the role of external powers in the region. Decades-long diplomatic engagement by multiple actors, such as the EU, United States, Russia, NATO, OSCE, and UN, has only stabilized the region to a certain degree, yet key disputes remain unresolved, and in some cases international efforts are wavering. The European Union initiative, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue (encouraged by Brussels

[338] NATO Association of Canada, *Hybrid Threats in the Western Balkans: Implications for NATO and Transnational Security*, 2023, https://natoassociation.ca/hybrid-threats-in-the-western-balkans-implications-for-nato-and-transnational-security/ (accessed May 6, 2025).
[339] Ibid.

since 2011), has so far failed to establish peace and produce a comprehensive treaty agreement for normalization of relations between Serbia and *Kosovo. However, it achieved interim agreements (such as the 2013 Brussels Agreement and the roadmap in the 2023 *Ohrid* meetings), implementation has been in deadlock. Both sides accuse the other of not being willing to cooperate. EU officials emphasize that *Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti has delayed the creation of the promised Serb municipal association, while Serbia continue to block *Kosovo's membership in international bodies and refuses to recognize its independence. The result of such actions is that mediation is losing credibility, since dialogue has become a proactive exercise rather than conflict resolution. In the same manner, Bosnia and Herzegovina has similar mediation results, with an evident decrease in the EU's influence. The mediation process by the EU is failing; therefore, if the EU does not change its course, the process could potentially collapse. The power-sharing institutions established under the Dayton Agreement endure under continuous external supervision, mostly under the supervision of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and the EUFOR Althea peacekeeping force. Yet, these mechanisms are failing under external and internal pressures. The EU enlargement policy has lost momentum among the leaders in the country due to the internal divisions. Since the power is divided among the three largest ethnicities, all established distinct goals for the Federation, a common policy is not likely to occur. Recently, popular frustrations have been evident regarding the EU mediation efforts. Considering Russia's and China's role—for instance, backing Belgrade and Banja Luka with diplomatic cover to resist Western pressure—the overall mediation process is in political deadlock. In the UN Security Council, the mediation is paralyzed due to the veto by Russia and China on any resolutions considering *Kosovo or Bosnia's international mandate status. This has affected the nationalist rhetoric in the region, backing local nationalists: they know that the West is not the only power influencing the region; therefore, the region is becoming more divided. In short, international mediation mechanisms are straining under opposing geopolitical rivals.

Meanwhile, global conflict trends have started to affect the processes in the Balkans, increasing the risks of strategic miscalculation. The war in Ukraine, which erupted in 2022, has had an especially profound if indirect impact. Initially, Russia's aggression in Ukraine sent shockwaves through the Balkans: NATO rapidly doubled its troop contingent in Bosnia (Operation Althea) as a precaution, and Western diplomats warned leaders like *Dodik* and *Vučić* against "opportunistic" moves while Europe's focus was on Kyiv. There have been calculations that if Russia had quickly finished the war in Ukraine, Bosnia might have been Russia's next target. However, rising anti-Russian sentiment across Europe has

amplified the arms race narratives and deepened regional divisions. While the EU publicly condemns Russian aggression and power projection in the region, it paradoxically contributes to the arms race by arming the region and pressuring countries to align with its policies, mirroring the very power projection it opposes.

Still, the ongoing conflict in Eastern Europe has polarized Balkan politics. Serbia, heavily dependent on Russian energy and sympathetic to Moscow historically, resisted imposing sanctions on Russia and has deepened its security cooperation with both Russia and China as a counterbalance. By contrast, *Kosovo, Albania, and other NATO members in the region aligned explicitly with Western positions on Ukraine. This realignment of loyalties along East-West lines increases the chance that a local crisis could draw in bigger powers. International crisis watchdogs now routinely cite the Western Balkans as a region where a proxy confrontation between Russia and NATO could play out if a conflict erupts (for example, a Bosnia breakup or a Serbia-Kosovo clash while global tensions are high)[340].

The ongoing instability in the Middle East – such as the 2023 Gaza war – and other global hotspots further strain the capacity of Western policymakers, raising fears that Balkan issues might be neglected until they explode. Analysts caution that amid multiple simultaneous crises (Ukraine, Middle East, even Indo-Pacific rivalries), a sudden Balkan flare-up could light regional tensions, potentially triggering a wider war, especially given the Balkans' strategic position in Europe's underbelly. For this reason, NATO and EU officials have re-identified the Western Balkans as critical of Euro-Atlantic security, warning against complacency. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept explicitly noted the need to prevent authoritarian influences and instability on the Alliance's doorstep, leading to renewed outreach and support for Balkan partners. External military involvement in the region also serves as a form of high stake signaling that can either reassure or antagonize. NATO's presence – from KFOR troops in *Kosovo to regular joint exercises with allies like North Macedonia and Albania – is intended to deter aggression and build interoperability. These activities underscore Western commitment but are often interpreted by Serbian nationalists and their patrons as provocations or attempts at encirclement. Conversely, Serbia's participation in military drills with Russia (such as past "*Slavic Brotherhood*" exercises) or its high-profile arms purchases from China are read by Western observers and

[340] PubAffairs Bruxelles, "Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans," *Opinion & Analysis*, 2023, https://www.pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/opinion-analysis/security-and-stability-scenarios-for-the-western-balkans/#:~:text=environmental%20pollution%2C%20as%20well%20as,and%20uncertainty%20surrounding%20transatlantic%20cooperation (accessed: May 15, 2025).

neighboring states as signals of Belgrade's geopolitical loyalties and its readiness to confront the NATO-aligned bloc.

Consequently, each side views the other's military cooperation through a lens of worst-case assumptions. The lack of an inclusive security forum exacerbates this: there is no equivalent of a Helsinki Accords or regional arms-control treaty to regulate or even transparently announce such exercises. A benign training maneuver can easily be blown out of proportion by media and politicians. For instance, when NATO conducted large-scale exercises in the Adriatic and Balkan area, Serbian tabloids decried them as exercises for an occupation; similarly, when Serbia hosted Russian trainers for a joint counterterrorism drill, *Kosovo and Montenegro treated it as a potential drill for destabilizing actions. Misperceptions are being uncontrolled. This underscores the failure of international mechanisms to instill mutual confidence. Institutions that do exist – like the OSCE or various EU missions – lack either the mandate or the trust of all parties to function as neutral arbiters of military transparency. The burden thus falls on ad-hoc great power engagement to prevent incidents from spiraling. It was telling that after the September 2023 *Banjska* clash in Kosovo, high-level U.S. intervention was required to calm the situation: Washington leaned on Belgrade to pull back troops from the border, even as NATO rushed additional forces to deter any adventurism.

Such crisis management, while effective in the moment, illustrates that peace is fragile and heavily dependent on the attentiveness of outside powers. Going forward, the Western Balkans faces a paradox in their security architecture. On one hand, sustained international engagement – through EU and NATO integration processes, peacekeeping contingents, and diplomatic facilitation – is widely deemed essential to prevent a return to violence. On the other hand, the credibility of the international community is being eroded by its own mixed signals and waning leverage. The "failure of mediation" is not absolute – day-to-day peace is largely maintained – but neither is there a clear path to durable solutions. To avoid worst-case scenarios, experts call for reinvigorated strategies: for example, some propose appointing a high-profile U.S.–EU envoy with a strong mandate to push through a Serbia-Kosovo settlement or significantly expanding EUFOR with heavy assets to deter Bosnian separatists. Others argue the EU must get more serious about its enlargement promises to undercut Russian and

Chinese influence, essentially "outcompeting" the autocratic powers for hearts and minds in the Balkans[341].

It is evident that the region's future will be shaped not only in local capitals but also within the corridors of global influence. The Western Balkans remains a geopolitical crossroads – a fact both unfortunate (as it invites competition) and potentially fortunate (as it ensures the major powers cannot afford to ignore it). If international mediation mechanisms can be retooled to address core grievances impartially, and if global conflicts do not drastically redraw great-power priorities, there is hope that the current cycle of tension can be managed short of open conflict. Failing that, the region will persist in a state of controlled instability, perpetually one misstep away from crisis. In an era of renewed East–West rivalry, the onus is on global and regional actors alike to prevent the Balkans' unresolved disputes and militaristic currents from converging into a perfect storm. The alternative – a security vacuum where nationalism and militarization reign unchecked – could see the Balkans once again export instability to the broader continent, a scenario that history has already warned against.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans today represents a volatile security environment, driven by the intersection of domestic nationalist pressures, unresolved regional disputes, technological disruption, and the waning effectiveness of international mediation. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, rising nationalism has become the dominant political and strategic force in the region, reactivating historical grievances and transforming security policy into a tool of identity politics. Unresolved tensions - particularly those between Serbia and *Kosovo, but also among BiH's entities and between Serbia and Croatia—persist as structural risks, capable of escalating into open conflict under the right conditions.

The renewal of military investment across the region, combined with the rapid diffusion of disruptive technologies such as AI, drones, and cyber tools, has deepened mistrust and surpassed the outdated arms control and mediation frameworks carried over from the post-war era. As traditional lines between offense and defense blur, even defensive modernization is increasingly interpreted through a lens of aggression. The lack of effective crisis management mechanisms, binding regional

[341] Militaire Spectator, "The Situation in Bosnia Is Getting Worse by the Day," 2023, https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/situation-bosnia-getting-worse-day#:~:text=with%20tanks,interview%20with%20the%20Militaire%20Spectator (accessed May 16, 2025).

arms-control agreements, or credible mediation processes exacerbates the vulnerability of the region to spirals of insecurity.

Moreover, external actors - whether through direct involvement, selective alignment, or passive neglect - continue to shape the dynamics on the ground. Russia's and China's support for nationalist leaders, NATO's uneven perception across the region, and the EU's declining leverage all highlight the fragmentation of influence and the erosion of once-dominant diplomatic tools. With the global order itself in flux - marked by war in Ukraine, tensions in the Middle East, and rising great-power rivalry - the Balkans risks becoming not just a passive recipient of external influence, but a possible flashpoint for broader geopolitical confrontation.

In sum, the current trajectory in the Western Balkans reflects a deteriorating security environment characterized by distrust, arms buildup, and competing narratives of sovereignty. Without renewed and credible mechanisms for conflict prevention, arms control, and political reconciliation, the region remains trapped in a cycle of strategic uncertainty. The following chapter will address these systemic shortcomings by proposing a comprehensive set of policy recommendations aimed at preventing escalation and fostering a sustainable regional security framework.

Chapter V - Policy Recommendations

The Western Balkans has entered a new phase of militarization since 2014, marked by intensified regional rivalries, renewed great-power competition, and the collapse of existing arms control norms. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the regional arms race has accelerated in the absence of a modern regulatory framework, leaving the Western Balkans vulnerable to rising instability and strategic miscalculations. The Dayton-era agreements, while effective in the post-war period, are now outdated and incapable of addressing the challenges posed by advanced technologies, cyber warfare, and asymmetric threats. Simultaneously, external actors have deepened divisions through selective alliances, while unresolved disputes fuel nationalist policies and erode trust.

To reverse these trends and reorient the region toward cooperative security, this chapter proposes five actionable policy recommendations:

1. Update the Dayton Framework to incorporate emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs), such as drones, cyber weapons, and autonomous systems.
2. Establish a comprehensive regional arms control framework, specifically designed for the Western Balkans, that extends beyond conventional weapon categories.
3. Institutionalize confidence-building and transparency measures, including real-time data exchange, joint inspections, and a regional digital arms registry.
4. Create regional implementation structures, such as a Western Balkans Security and Arms Control Commission, supported by neutral international actors.
5. Address feasibility and political obstacles through phased implementation, civil society engagement, and pragmatic approaches to unresolved status disputes (e.g., Kosovo).

Each of these recommendations is elaborated in the sections that follow. The chapter begins by demonstrating why the Dayton framework is no longer sufficient for the evolving security environment (Section 5.1), followed by a detailed proposal for a new regional security architecture (5.2). Sections 5.3 and 5.4 focus on regulating emerging technologies and building mutual transparency, while Section 5.5 offers institutional solutions for sustainable implementation. Finally, Section 5.6 explores political challenges and the potential for the Western Balkans to emerge as a global model of cooperative arms control.

5.1.Modernize the Dayton Framework to Regulate Emerging Security Threats

The Dayton arms control regime must be modernized to include emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) such as drones, cyber weapons, and autonomous systems. This will prevent these unregulated domains from destabilizing the region and provide a foundation for a broader, updated regional security architecture.

The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in 1995, established limits on conventional heavy weaponry in the former Yugoslavia, successfully preserving a military balance for nearly three decades. Specifically, the Florence Agreement was signed in 1996 as part of the Dayton Peace Accords, under Article IV of Annex 1B, limiting five categories of heavy armaments – battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, artillery (75mm caliber or greater), combat aircraft, and combat helicopters[342]. According to Article IV, the countries were supposed to reduce the above-mentioned categories in a period of 16 months[343]. According to the Arms Control Association's report, the parties reduced nearly 6,600 heavy weapons during its initial implementation phase[344].

Even though it significantly reduced stockpiles of conventional weaponry, it also prevented a conventional arms race and served as a foundation for the regional dialogue, under the guidance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). However, this agreement has lost its relevance, since it was a product of its time – strictly focused on tanks, artillery, armored vehicles, and other traditional arsenals – and it was never designed to address technological advancements and new forms of warfare that characterize the post-2014 military buildups in the region and modernization. Furthermore, it does not address cyber warfare capabilities, drones or unmanned systems, advanced missile technologies, or artificial intelligence-enabled weapons – since it has no provision within the agreement. The parties involved in drafting Dayton's agreement could not have foreseen the advancements in the military field, especially modern military strategies, including cyber and hybrid warfare, or even the proliferation of autonomous and remotely piloted weapons. This resulted in leaving these domains entirely unregulated by any regional framework. Therefore, what has worked for

[342] Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), *The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 1995, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/0/126173.pdf (accessed May 9, 2025).
[343] OSCE, *Florence Agreement*, 1996.
[344] Arms Control Association, "Parties Complete Weapons Reductions Under Balkan Arms Control Accord," Press Release, October 1, 1997, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997-10/press-releases/parties-complete-weapons-reductions-under-balkan-arms-control-accord (accessed May 9, 2025).

the last three decades in reducing conventional forces now becomes insufficient in addressing modern challenges.

Emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) – such as armed drones, offensive cyber tools, and AI-driven autonomous weapons – now can circumvent the numerical restrictions and verification processes set by the Dayton's Agreement for tanks and artillery[345]. These advanced systems have the ability for significant first strikes and pose a significant threat due to the asymmetric advantages and can operate invisibly across borders and may even neutralize or negate legacy weapon stockpiles. In summary, these types of weapons undermine the balance established by Dayton's agreement. Without any updated agreements to cover emerging threats, the region faces a regulatory vacuum where the nations can modernize their arsenals and militaries with disruptive technologies without any transparency or restraint limit – a circumstance that fundamentally threatens regional stability.

Globally, the absence of such a regulatory mechanism for EDTs poses a significant threat to international peace and human security. Drones represent a significant shift in how wars are waged, reshaping military strategies by significantly lowering operational costs and enabling precise strikes without risking personnel. However, recently these tools have been criticized for human rights violations, mainly due to inadequate legal frameworks and accountability mechanisms. The proliferation of drones was evident in recent conflicts, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine, Israel and Hamas, and recent clash between India and Pakistan. In 2022 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan effectively used Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones and Israeli-made Harop loitering munitions[346]. The balance on the battlefield has been shifted dramatically by systematically destroying Armenian tanks, artillery, air defense, and logistic convoys – severely impacting both military effectiveness and morale. Recent conflict between Israel and Hamas demonstrates drone proliferation to non-state actors. Hamas has periodically deployed DIY (do it yourself) "suicide drones" (e.g., the *Shehab*) against Israel, launching small fixed-wing UAVs (based on Iranian designs) to diffuse Israeli defense[347]. This was a crucial move for Hamas, forcing Israeli forces to adapt. In order to shoot down some of the drones, Israel had to use its Iron Dome air defense system and even employ F-16s that

[345] Janković and Kostić Šulejić, "Emerging and Disruptive Technologies," 2023; Ejdus, "Serbia and Croatia," 2021.
[346] EVN Report, "Beyond the Drone Hype: Unpacking Nagorno-Karabakh's Real Lessons," 2024, https://evnreport.com/opinion/beyond-the-drone-hype-unpacking-nagorno-karabakhs-real-lessons/ (accessed May 9, 2025).
[347] Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "Drones Add Little to Rocket-Filled Israel-Palestine Skies, but Represent Growing Global Threat," May 2021, https://thebulletin.org/2021/05/drones-add-little-to-rocket-filled-israel-palestine-skies-but-represent-growing-global-threat/ (accessed May 12, 2025).

succeeded in destroying another UAV mid-air[348]. This demonstrates how relatively low-cost drones allow militant groups to threaten advanced militaries, which adds a new layer to asymmetric warfare. An additional example of such use was seen in Türkiye's aggressive "drone diplomacy" across Africa. Essentially, Turkey has sold its affordable, combat-proven *Bayraktar TB2* drones to countries like Somalia, Libya, Niger, and Ethiopia, boosting Ankara's geopolitical influence in the continent[349]. In Ethiopia's civil conflict, for instance, drone strikes reportedly killed over three hundred civilians in Tigray by early 2022[350]. For Ankara, this was a strategic move in the region, complementing its trade and infrastructure projects in Africa. This has demonstrated how exporting drones in fragile regions can worsen the situation and prolong conflicts and lead to tragic mistakes, killing innocent people. Similarly, the conflict in Ukraine demonstrated how drones can redefine traditional ways of waging a war. Both Ukrainian and Russian forces constantly have been using drones, from sophisticated military UAVs to cheaply produced civilian drones designed for military purposes[351]. The price for cheap civilian FPV drones goes from $400 to $1000 dollars, mostly supplied with explosive devices or used for precise, sole use "kamikaze" strikes. The key alarming feature these drones have is the one enabling rapid target detection and destruction. As many videos from the battlefield have shown that drones killed wounded or surrendering soldiers, which indicates serious violations of IHL. Besides substantial physical damage, they also cause psychological trauma, taking into consideration their unpredictability and difficulty of defense against them. This type of usage against civilians and infrastructure creates a broader implication of possible war crimes, and it urges the international community for an updated legal framework that would limit such use.

Crucially, drone strikes were not limited to military targets, actively targeting civilians, civilian infrastructure, neglecting serious humanitarian and legal concerns under international humanitarian law. Moreover, International Humanitarian Law, primarily governed by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols (1977), so as customary international law, establishes rules to protect civilians and those, e.g., who are wounded or surrendered[352]. In fact, drones are not banned according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, and it affirms that UAVs are not prohibited

[348] Ibid.
[349] BBC News, "Turkey's Bayraktar TB2 Drone: Why African States Are Buying Them," 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62485325 (accessed May 12, 2025).
[350] Ibid.
[351] Reuters, "How Drone Combat in Ukraine Is Changing Warfare," 2024, https://www.reuters.com/graphics/UKRAINE-CRISIS/DRONES/dwpkeyjwkpm/ (accessed May 9, 2025).
[352] International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP), "Implications of the Use of Drones in International Law," 2014, https://www.icip.cat/perlapau/en/article/implications-of-the-use-of-drones-in-international-law/ (accessed May 9, 2025).

by IHL and can be used in compliance with the law[353]. In practice, however, their use often strains core IHL principles like distinction, proportionality, and accountability. The principle of distinction requires one is attacking to always distinguish between combatants and civilians[354]. Modern drones are equipped with advanced optics and precision munitions, theoretically helping to strike only legitimate targets. Yet paradoxically, the remote nature of drone operations can undermine distinction. Analysts note that drone operators rely on sensor feed and intelligence that may be imperfect or delayed, without on-the-ground confirmation[355]. In multiple drone campaigns, for example, there have been cases of misidentification, including so-called "signature strikes" where some patterns of life were deemed sufficient to target individuals, confusing civilians, and combatants[356]. Considering drone strike's precision, it can be questioned if the target selection is based on incorrect data, since the strike on the wrong target is an indiscriminate attack. This creates a significant risk when non-state actors use commercial drones to drop explosives, since those improvised drones often lack robust target discrimination, increasing the danger of hitting civilians. The principle of proportionality is another IHL principle challenged by drone warfare. IHL dictates that expected collateral damage from an attack must not be excessive relative to the anticipated military advantage[357]. Drones enable low-risk, remote strikes, potentially reducing the use of force and increasing damage to civilians, as leaders may approve attacks in populated areas when their own forces are not at risk[358]. Armed drones have caused significant collateral damage in urban operations, for example, in Gaza. The proliferation of such drones allows even minor powers to conduct frequent airstrikes, increasing threats to civilians. In the Balkans, unregulated combat drones could escalate conflicts, undermining proportional force. Another principle of accountability of IHL is challenged, especially during secret programs, making it hard to determine who is responsible when unlawful killings occur[359]. Different actors and classifications of such actors complicate investigations and war crime prosecutions, despite IHL's applicability[360]. Lack of transparency in targeting and post-strike assessments, combined with redress for victims, which is

[353] ICRC, "Ensuring the Use of Remotely Piloted Aircraft or Armed Drones in Counterterrorism and Military Operations Complies with International Humanitarian Law," 2014, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ensuring-use-remotely-piloted-aircraft-or-armed-drones-counterterrorism-and-military (accessed May 12, 2025).
[354] Ibid.
[355] Geneva Call, "Humanitarian Concerns Raised by the Use of Armed Drones," 2020, https://www.genevacall.org/news/humanitarian-concerns-raised-by-the-use-of-armed-drones/ (accessed May 12, 2025).
[356] Ibid.
[357] ICRC, "*Use of Remotely Piloted Aircraft*," 2014
[358] Geneva Call, "Humanitarian Concerns Raised by the Use of Armed Drones," 2020.
[359] Ibid.
[360] ICRC, "*Use of Remotely Piloted Aircraft*," 2014

rare, decreases trust, as was evident in the unpunished U.S. drone strike that killed ten Afghan civilians in 2021[361]. Clearer policies and independent oversight are needed to ensure legal compliance and rigorous investigations.

These case studies and legal concerns are beneficial for the Western Balkans in order for the region to apply these measures in a new security framework that would address emerging technologies. This means not just reducing their proliferation but also reinforcing humanitarian law compliance. Regional armed forces and policy makers should be encouraged to review targeting doctrines to uphold distinction and proportionality when using drones or similar systems. Collaborative dialogues could help establish norms, such as advance notification of drone exercises or mutual inspection of armed UAV units, to reduce misperceptions. By learning from conflicts abroad, the Western Balkans can devise forward-looking policies that harness technological advantages without undermining the legal and ethical foundations of security.

Cyber warfare presents another critical unregulated field in the Dayton's Accords. The international community witnessed the transformative potential of cyber operations in incidents like Stuxnet's sabotage of Iranian nuclear facilities in 2010[362]. Since this attack, cyber warfare has become an essential component of warfare, frequently targeting civilian infrastructures like power grids and banking systems, causing significant harm. Such attacks became a widespread practice in the Western Balkans, for instance, Serbian army was an object of cyber-attack, targeting information systems of the Serbian army and state energy facilities in 2024[363]. Additionally, recent reports have shown that an increase occurs in cyber-attacks across Balkan states, including large-scale data breaches and attacks on critical services[364]. In the region, especially it is a critical fact that the malicious actors can use and exploit ethnic and political fault lines through disinformation campaigns and hacking. Similar to drone usage, cyber warfare poses potential breaches of international law. Despite this, international frameworks explicitly governing the conduct and limitation of cyber warfare remain largely absent, leaving critical vulnerabilities unaddressed.

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[361] Human Rights Watch, "US: End Impunity for Civilian Casualties," December 14, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/14/us-end-impunity-civilian-casualties (accessed May 12, 2025).
[362] Holloway, J., "Stuxnet Worm Attack on Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *Stanford University*, 2015, http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2015/ph241/holloway1/ (accessed May 9, 2025).
[363] Balkan Insight, "Latest Cyber Attacks in Serbia Raise Fresh Questions About Defence," January 16, 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/16/latest-cyber-attacks-in-serbia-raise-fresh-questions-about-defence/ (accessed May 9, 2025).
[364] Atlantic Council, *How Do Cyber Attacks Threaten the Balkans?*

Besides creating transparency and verification mechanisms targeting drones, cyber operations, and autonomous weapons, a new framework could involve initial confidence-building measures, such as mandatory notifications of drone acquisitions and deployments, transparency in cyber defense capabilities, and limitations on autonomous weapons. By taking small manageable steps, like regional information sharing agreements or joint anti-drone and cybersecurity exercises, trust could gradually be built among the states in the region, opening the way for more comprehensive regional agreements. This would serve as a positive example beyond the region. It would present a model that could influence broader international norms and inspire similar efforts elsewhere. For instance, the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), despite its limitations, has shown that regional and global arms control initiatives can effectively spread norms of responsible behavior and transparency[365]. Similarly, a Balkan treaty on EDTs could demonstrate effectiveness, stimulating broader international dialogue and potentially shaping future global agreements.

5.2. Establishing a New Regional Security Framework to Replace Outdated Dayton-Era Models

To overcome the outdated limitations of the Dayton/Florence regime and address post-2014 security shifts, this thesis recommends the creation of a new, comprehensive regional security framework tailored to the Western Balkans. The major goal is to reduce arms race and security dilemma in the region by promoting cooperation and arms control into new domains – notably unmanned systems, cyber operations, and other EDTs – where current agreements have no provisions. In this regard, the region can move beyond the arrangements from wartime and embrace new dynamic security architecture to answer contemporary challenges.

In order to propose a new framework, the analysis of current international practices, and combining positive elements is necessary, yet remaining sensitive to local political realities. Notwithstanding, this would not be an abstract solution but rather a solution that would serve as an international precedent. The positive elements from other international practices need to be "taken," such as OSCE confidence-building measures, ASEAN's regional norm, and various WMD-free zone treaties, while recognizing the specific region's institutional, geopolitical, and historical context. Essentially, the thesis recommends practical measures – from drone usage protocols to cyber

[365] United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), "Arms Trade Treaty," 2014, https://disarmament.unoda.org/convarms/arms-trade-treaty-2/ (accessed May 9, 2025).

confidence-building – that increase transparency and trust. The existing framework is characterized by enduring mistrust and influences from foreign actors[366]; however, regional arms control initiative, with international support, can covert the region from a security consumer into a normative "leader" or "exporter of security"[367].

The following subsection outlines the key elements of the proposed framework in depth. While each pillar addresses a distinct field, they are not designed to operate in isolation. Together they would propose a coherent roadmap, moving the region beyond arms competition, toward a rule-based vision of regional security. Moreover, the key elements outlined in the following subchapter will be: (1) incorporation of emerging technologies into arms control, (2) robust confidence-building and transparency measures, (3) tailored institutional structures with external actor engagement, and (4) an assessment of political feasibility and normative impact. In the long term, the implementation of such measures could position the region not as a place of instability and external influence, but a source of innovation in the global discourse on arms control and cooperative threat reduction.

5.3. Expand Arms Control to Include Drones, Cyber Operations, and Future Military Technologies

The major pillar of the new framework in the region should be the inclusion of emerging and disruptive technologies in regional arms control and security cooperation. Existing agreements were concluded in the era much before unmanned drones, offensive cyber tools of waging a war, and AI-driven systems became dominant. To avoid strategic gaps, the Western Balkans must extend arms control norm to these realms.

Firstly, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and Autonomous Systems are the major pillars of the suggested framework. The recent proliferation of military drones in the Balkans – from Turkish-supplied combat UAVs to Albania, Kosovo, and others, to Chinese-supplied UAVs to Serbia – has introduced a new dimension of arms competition, which goes beyond traditional one. Inexpensive drones with the ability to target high-value objectives (demonstrated in numerous conflicts around the globe), their unchecked spread risks destabilizing the balance in the region. Commonly, this would

[366] SIPRI, *European Union Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium Paper* No. 93, 2025, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/eunpdc_no_93.pdf (accessed May 10, 2025).
[367] SEESAC, *Roadmap for a Sustainable Solution to the Illegal Possession, Misuse and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons and their Ammunition in the Western Balkans*, 2024, https://www.seesac.org/SALW-Control-Roadmap/ (accessed May 10, 2025).

include transparency measures (e.g. annual exchange of information on each state's acquisitions of armed drones and loitering munitions), limits agreed or guidelines on the deployment of armed UAVs, and geographical restrictions (preventing stationing or flying armed drones within a before defined zone near borders or conflict-prone areas). The consultative body would be established that would review new drone acquisitions to make concerns less intense so that one state's new capability might upset others' security. Corresponding provisions would help manage the immediate acceleration of drone procurement, in order to prevent drone race in the region. In fact, foreign actors have already leveraged the existing arms race in the region by partnering with some countries, neglecting others (e.g., Türkiye's partnership on Bayraktars with Kosovo but not Serbia), and emphasizing how asymmetric acquisitions feed distrust. Yet, by agreeing collectively on norms for UAV use, notification of drone flights (near borders or sensitive areas), and possibly limits on such drones, the Balkan states can prevent miscalculation and set a global precedent in controlling unmanned systems.

Secondly, cyber operations and hybrid tactics in the cybersecurity domain present a new threat that traditional arms frameworks cannot effectively address[368], and the need for mutually agreed limits and cooperation is greatest in this field. In the recent years, the governments in the region and critical infrastructure have suffered several severe cyber incidents, for instance, breaches in Albania and Montenegro in 2022 associated with state-backed actors. Meanwhile, most of the states in the region have faced allegations of secretly conducting surveillance and digital espionage against each other's citizens and institutions, masking the line between internal security and external threats. To address this, the framework suggests a regional cyber security pact focused on confidence-building rather than hard limitations. All countries in the region must commit to refrain from using or permitting their territory to be used for malicious cyber activities against each other, aligning with emerging international norms for responsible state conduct in cyberspace. Moreover, the potential established pact would establish 24/7 cyber incident communication teams (extending the OSCE's list of cyber-Points-of-Contact)[369], in case of cyber-attack detection, affected states can quickly communicate, share technical information, and assist each other in attribution before any accusations spiral into political disputes. The special joint cyber workshops and table-top exercises could be organized (for example, potentially under the framework of the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Center in Montenegro)

[368] Jevtić and Kostić Šulejić, "Emerging and Disruptive Technologies," 219.
[369] DCAF, *Cybersecurity Capacity Building and Donor Coordination in the Western Balkans*, March 2021, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/CybersecurityCapacityBuilding_DonorCoordination_inWB_mar2021.pdf (accessed May 10, 2025).

consistent with UN recommendations for regional capacity-building through training and simulations, which can improve regional coordination and readiness[370]. Over time, this cooperation could evolve, like DCAF's report suggesting Western Balkans Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) network, facilitating real-time threat intelligence sharing across borders[371]. By enhancing transparency and mutual assistance in cyber realms, this measure would reduce the risk of potential cyber incidents. While global cyber arms control is still evolving, the Western Balkans can take advantage of OSCE cyber–Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) and EU cyber diplomacy guidelines to develop a regional framework for cooperation and restraint[372]. This type of approach acknowledges that cyber "weapons" are difficult to count and predict, yet trust can be built through communication mechanisms, common norms, and capacity-building.

Thirdly, other emerging military technologies besides drones and cyber should be addressed. Framework should remain applicable and adaptable to modern technologies that could fuel the arms race. These types of technologies include artificial intelligence (AI) in warfare, advanced surveillance tools, and any future deployments of missiles or space-based assets in the Western Balkans. The future framework should include provision, for instance, that autonomous weapons systems will not be introduced without human-in-the-loop control, reflecting the ethical norms many states are taking in global forums. The Balkans states could jointly endorse international efforts to ban lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), positioning the region as a normative leader on this issue. Similarly, some reports expressed concern on increased use of biometric surveillance and facial recognition in some states[373]. Therefore, the possible framework should introduce privacy and oversight norms, e.g., requiring parliamentary notification when such tools are acquired for security purposes, and regional exchange of practices to prevent their abuse. It is worth mentioning the fact that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are not present in the region, however, a symbolic WMD-free zone declaration could be included to reinforce commitments to non-proliferation. This declaration would align with existing treaties (NPT, CWC, etc.) and emphasize the region's intent to be an "exporter of security" rather than conflict[374]. In sum, by effectively extending arms control principles to new tech domains,

[370] United Nations, *Mapping Exercise on Global and Regional Cyber Capacity-Building Initiatives*, *A/AC.292/2022/2,* 2022, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3968030?ln=en (accessed May 11, 2025).
[371] DCAF, *Cybersecurity Capacity Building and Donor Coordination in the Western Balkans*, 2021.
[372] DCAF, *Cybersecurity Capacity Building and Donor Coordination in the Western Balkans*, 2021.
[373] IntelliNews, *Western Balkan States Increase Use of Surveillance*.
[374] SEESAC*, SALW Roadmap*, 2024.

the Western Balkans can fill the critical gaps left by Dayton-era accords and prevent future arms competition.

5.4.Introduce Regional Confidence-Building and Transparency Measures

Any effective framework in the security domain must rely on robust confidence-building measures (CBMs) and transparency provisions. Considering mistrust that exists among Balkan states, mechanisms that increase mutual transparency and predictability are crucial to escape the security dilemma logic. The proposed framework should modernize classic CSBMs (as found in OSCE's Vienna Document and Dayton's Article IV Agreement) and adapt to new realities by introducing new CSBMs customized to regional needs.

The first measure should be comprehensive information exchange. All states involved should agree on annual exchange of military information covering personnel strength, major conventional armaments, force structure, and defense budgets. This framework could take advantage of the OSCE Vienna Document's data exchange mechanism, adapted to small-scale requirements appropriate for smaller military forces. The existing sub-regional arms control agreement under Dayton has remained for 30 years, that why expanding its scope and membership (to include all Western Balkans states) and uploading categories would build upon a proven confidence-building tool.

The second measure would be notifications and observations of military activities. This would be available in order to prevent uncertainty that could be misread as offensive preparations; states should commit to advance notifications of significant military activities. For example, any military exercise that exceeds certain agreed-upon size or that involves sensitive capabilities (e.g., live-fire drone exercises) would be notified to all regional neighboring states weeks in advance. However, it should be taken into consideration reduced troop threshold for notification, compared to the Vienna Document, would be recommended due to the relatively smaller size of the armies involved – since any exercise involving even a few battalions, or some cross-border troop movements could cause alarm if unannounced in advance. Moreover, the system of reciprocal observation should be introduced: countries should invite each other's observers to attend military exercises, inspections, or weapon tests. Such measure would serve as a precedent, similar to the precedent established by OSCE practice after

the Cold War[375]. As an example, Serbia could invite observers from Croatia to its next military exercise or parade, and vice versa, normalizing military transparency as a regional norm.

The third measure would be arms control inspections and verification. The framework adding on Dayton Article IV model would create teams for on-site inspections to verify compliance with limits set in the new framework and information sharing. Mixed inspection teams (inspectors and officers from multiple Balkan countries, possibly with OSCE observers) could conduct random inspections of military sites. This would benefit in building honesty. The updated verification should also extend to new tech. However, verification of unmanned vehicles do not pose such a challenge as verification of cyber capabilities, but here verification takes the form of demonstrating compliance with procedures – for instance, states could periodically report on their implementation of agreed cyber norms (such as no offensive malware deployment) and allow neutral experts to review their critical infrastructure protections. This approach builds confidence; it shows that countries trust each other enough to permit a degree of oversight. This approach is not new, since the region has memory of such practices under the Dayton verification regime in initial years, but now this practice can be leveraged to design a new effective inspection mechanism. Additionally, technical support from foreign partners can strengthen verification. For example, EU satellite imagery could be shared to monitor military developments as a confidence measure, or NATO's KFOR/EUFOR peacekeeping missions could serve as impartial facilitators for inspections in Kosovo and Bosnia respectively, given their presence.

The fourth key feature is structured communication and establishing hotlines. An important CBM to reduce crisis escalation is the establishment of direct communication channels among regional security leadership. This would formalize military-to-military hotlines, enabling instant communication between Defense Ministries, especially in events of some border incidents or airspace violation. For example, India and Pakistan's use of military hotlines was beneficial in avoiding misunderstandings during the ceasefire[376]. The hotline between the USSR and the U.S. during the Cold War prevented a "nuclear war." In regional context, a hotline could connect, for instance, the Serbian forces with the KFOR command in Kosovo, or even link all six capitals' crisis centers. Moreover, establishing annual

[375] EEAS, "EU Statement at the Security Dialogue on Confidence and Security Building Measures and Conventional Arms Control," 2018, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fsc_no_881_eu_statement_security_dialogue_confidence_and_security_building_measures_and_conventional_arms_control.pdf (accessed May 10, 2025).
[376] NDTV, "India-Pakistan Military Officials To Discuss Next Steps As Ceasefire Holds," 2025, https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/india-pakistan-military-officials-to-discuss-next-steps-as-ceasefire-holds-8392394 (accessed May 10, 2025).

security dialogue under the framework, similar to "Vienna talks," where officials could meet to address any concerns about each other's military activities and to update one another on defense reforms. These dialogues, especially if held under neutral facilitation (e.g., by the OSCE or Regional Cooperation Council), promote the habit of cooperation and allow grievances to be addressed in a controlled, diplomatic setting rather than through nationalist posturing.

Since mutual transparency is a foundation of confidence-building in the volatile region, it would be beneficial to establish a Balkan-wide Arms Transparency Platform as a digital arms register where all regional states regularly report their military holdings, arms acquisitions, and relevant military activities. A platform like that could be hosted by a neutral regional body (for instance, the Regional Cooperation Council or new Western Balkans Security Secretariat) and would function with both state inputs and independent verification. Functioning of such a platform would be by each state participation, submitting standardized data on a set schedule (most likely annually or semi-annually). Standardized data include inventory numbers of major conventional weapons, planned arms purchases or imports, and notifications of significant military exercises or deployments.

The design would be similar to one used in global transparency instruments, presenting major weapon types, including emerging technologies[377]. Regular updates would allow us to track changes over time. In order to encourage accuracy and transparency, independent verification composed of inspectors or military experts under the OSCE supervision would carry out inspections. Additionally, combining such inspections on the field with satellite imagery, open-source information would be credible. The platform could integrate alerts, when a country exceeds certain capability, neighbors should receive notification through the system. This concept is inspired by successful transparency measures at the worldwide level. The United Nations maintains the UN Register of Conventional Arms[378], which is a voluntary instrument where states annually report their international arms transfers in several major categories. This platform captures roughly 90% of global weapons trade volumes[379]. This could be modernized in the Balkans case by capturing not just military transfers, but holdings and procurement from domestic production, and making it bound, not just voluntary. A closer analogue is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Vienna Document, a landmark confidence-building agreement. Under the Vienna Document, all 57 OSCE states (including those in the Western

[377] United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), *UN Register of Conventional Arms*, n.d., https://disarmament.unoda.org/convarms/register/ (accessed May 13, 2025).
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.

Balkans) annually exchange detailed information on their armed forces – covering personnel strength, the numbers and types of major weapon systems, defense budgets, and plans for deployment[380]. This could build on the achievements of SEESAC in promoting transparency, especially tailoring this platform to the Western Balkan context. Although the region itself is considered to be among the world's most transparent regions I terms of arms export control reporting, and this could even extend by being transparent to arms possession and procurement, not just exports[381]. A potential model at the regional level was the Inter-American Convention on Transparency in Conventional Weapons Acquisitions in Latin America, where states agreed to notify each other of arms purchases[382].

Over time, this potential platform could significantly improve confidence and reduce miscalculation. This would serve as an early warning system, if one state plans to acquire some weaponry, everyone could be notified through official channels rather than via rumors or media leaks. Instead of sparking an arms race, acquisition by neighboring state would be entered in the regional registry and would be open for discussion. Transparency would reduce the possibility of new arms race over time. Knowing that any major procurement must be reported (and justified as defensive) creates peer pressure for restraint; governments will be aware that any destabilizing buildup will be plainly evident to all, inviting diplomatic scrutiny. The data collected can also enable cooperative security analysis: the regional body could publish annual Balkan Security Outlooks summarizing force trends, much like how SIPRI's public database provides tools to identify arms build-up patterns globally. In the end, the platform presents a possibility to build trust through transparency.

5.5. Create Institutional Mechanisms with Support from International Partners

For the proposed framework to become effective, it requires institutional structures at a regional level and the constructive involvement of international actors. The Western Balkans have experience with both ad-hoc security initiatives and externally supervised agreements; this proposal mixes those experiences into a cohesive structure that ensures implementation and adaptability.

[380] Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), *Annual Exchange of Information under the Vienna Document 1999*, n.d., https://www.osce.org/fsc/74528 (accessed May 13, 2025).
[381] SEESAC, *SALW Roadmap*, 2024.
[382] Arms Control Association, *The International Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) at a Glance*, 2017, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/iactcw (accessed May 13, 2025).

A fundamental recommendation is the creation of a Regional Security and Arms Control Commission – a standing body involving representatives from all Western Balkan states. This Commission would supervise the implementation of the new framework: organizing information exchanges, coordinating inspections, managing compliance disputes, and updating the agreement over time. This standing body could be established on the existing Sub-Regional Consultative Commission (created by the Dayton Article IV agreement) but with a broader mandate and membership. Every Western Balkan jurisdiction – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia – should have a seat at the table (even the representatives of Kosovo as non-state actor). To navigate sensitive political issues (notably Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo), the framework could be established under international support (for example, as an OSCE- or EU-sponsored agreement) where entities participate without formal prejudice to status. This reflects on other regional forums practices (e.g., Kosovo sits alongside states in the RCC and OSCE forums under neutral designations). An international facilitator or guarantor could chair the Commission initially – perhaps the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office or an EU special representative – to lend authority and neutrality during the formative phase.

Focusing on updated existing institutions will also be cost-effective and signal continuity in the region. The proposal suggests utilizing RACVIAC – the Croatia-based Centre for Security Cooperation – as a technical secretariat or training center for the new framework. RACVIAC was founded in 2000 specifically as the "Regional Arms Control Verification and Implementation Assistance Centre" to support arms control in Southeast Europe[383]. Over the year institutions expanded into a broader security cooperation role, reflecting the needs of the region for change. With proper plan and support, RACVIAC can be reoriented to focus on emerging challenges: for instance, it could be a host of workshop on cyber CBMs, maintain a regional arms register database, and coordinate inspection training for the new drone/cyber provisions. Its existence serves as an example that Western Balkan states can cooperate on sensitive military issues under a neutral umbrella – a valuable asset for the proposed framework. Similarly, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), as the successor to the Stability Pact, provides a political platform for high-level dialogue and could integrate the security framework into its agenda. Regular meetings of defense and foreign ministers under RCC auspices to review framework progress would reinforce political buy-in.

[383] Bezbednost.org (2012) "CCMR and RACVIAC Have Signed the Memorandum of Understanding," March 5, 2012, https://bezbednost.org/en/ccmr-and-racviac-have-signed-the-memorandum-of-understanding/ (accessed May 10, 2025).

In order for institutions to function, the proper form of budgeting must be assessed. One of the viable solutions for this mechanism would be shared national contributions. Each member state (e.g., Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) would allocate an annual contribution to Commission's budget. The broad formula can be agreed, for instance, contributions according to each country's GDP or defense budget size, to ensure equity. This is a common practice in organizations such as OSCE or NATO, where coasts are shared according to a formula balancing ability to plan and stake in the security outcome. This would demonstrate collective ownership, where every state has an investment in the institution's success. Nonetheless, considering economic disparities in the region and some budget constraints, external support will be crucial, especially in the initial phase. Since the European Union has a strong interest in the stability in the region and previously has financed regional cooperation initiatives in many sectors, the Union would benefit from financing such initiatives. This could be done through providing grants to the institution running without overburdening local budgets. Another avenue could be support from other international organizations like the UN, through the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The OSCE could similarly contribute via different funds, especially considering the OSCE mandate in arms control in Bosnia and beyond. Moreover, bilateral donors (individual EU states, the US, UK, Russia, etc.) may be also willing to sponsor such program. In summary, a hybrid budget is a superior approach, where core costs are split among regional governments to ensure functioning in initial phase, and supplementary funds from the EU and other partners to strengthen institution's capacities. Over time, when the institution grows, the goal would be to increase share of local funding, approaching a phase of self-reliance.

Leadership and governance are another crucial aspect of the institution's framework. For the purpose of equality, the leadership positions, such as the Chair or Director-General and heads of key units, should rotate among member states on a fixed schedule. An inspirational model for this could be OSCE's Chairperson-in-Office, which rotates annually to give each state a chance to set agendas, or the rotating presidency of the EU Council among member states. For the proposed institution, rotation every two or three years could be implemented for the first term. This rotation feature prevents any single nation from dominating the institution and reassures all members that the mechanism will not be biased. Alongside the Director-General position, which is mostly representative role, a professional Chief of Staff or Secretary could be an internationally recruited export to manage day-to-day operation neutrally. The governing council of the Western Balkans countries should consist of representatives of

all member states. Their role would be to make major decisions (budget approvals, and program priorities) by consensus or qualified majority. The venue of meetings should also be rotating, considering the potential establishment of headquarters or a permanent secretariat location.

International actors could be valuable assets in the new framework's success since they are supporters of the process. The most crucial external supporter of such processes would be the European Union. Considering the EU's interest in a stable region and eventual enlargement, it has a lot to offer. The EU can provide incentives or fund such processes. For example, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) funds could be allocated to help states meet transparency commitments (e.g., upgrading monitoring technology or secure communications for hotlines). The EU is already funding initiatives like the Western Balkans SALW Control Roadmap and the Cyber Capacity Centre[384]. It could similarly support this broader framework, signaling that arms control and CBMs are part and parcel of the European integration path. Politically, EU endorsement would help legitimize the framework domestically in each state, framing it as a step toward the "European standard" of regional peace and cooperation[385].

Another crucial asset of this processes would be the role of the OSCE, which includes all Balkan states and external players (USA, Russia, etc.). The expertise of the OSCE and a comprehensive security approach would be valuable for the region. The framework could be established as an OSCE-led agreement, reflecting on the implementation of Dayton Article IV through OSCE mechanisms. The periodical review conferences or technical updates could be done through the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC), thereby considering the region's effort and "exporting" the initiative to wider European security architecture. This is especially useful for sharing lessons – for instance, if the Western Balkans develop a successful drone control regime, the OSCE could promote it as a model for other regions. Moreover, OSCE field missions in countries like Bosnia, Serbia, North Macedonia, etc., can assist with local capacity-building to implement commitments (as they have done in cybersecurity policy support)[386]. The importance of involving OSCE lies in engaging both Russia and the United States, members of the OSCE, as they have the "biggest" impact on the Balkans. Although this proposed framework would be focused on a specific region, this would present a positive outcome of the multilateral body where East and West sit together and reduce the chance of conflict

[384] European Council, *Brussels Declaration 2024*, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/wvld5ka1/brussels-declaration-2024-en.pdf (accessed May 10, 2025).
[385] SEESAC, *SALW Roadmap*, 2024.
[386] DCAF, *Cybersecurity Capacity Building and Donor Coordination in the Western Balkans*, 2021.

escalation, which can overcome zero-sum geopolitical games. Furthermore, the cooperative security in the OSCE could assure Russia that the arms control regime in the region is not aimed against its interests; similarly, it could assure the United States that the control regime is not a "projection" of Russian foreign policy promoting their interests.

In contrast, NATO's role should be more indirect, focusing on support. Although many countries in the regions are now NATO members or even partners, and NATO has ongoing missions (KFOR) and training programs in the region, however, some countries are still "reserved" toward NATO's membership and their involvement in common security. The Alliance can only encourage states in the region to commit to the regional framework, emphasizing the importance of regional arms control mechanisms that align with NATO's stability goals. NATO would offer practical support, for example, sharing surveillance data for verification, or continuing to facilitate dialogue between militaries (NATO's military-to-military engagement with Serbia could incorporate arms control topics). However, given Serbia's military neutrality and sensitivities about NATO, it would be wise for the framework's primary identity to remain civilian and regional, rather than NATO-led.

Finally, the United Nations and other multilateral regimes can endorse such efforts. A UN Security Council or General Assembly endorsement of the Western Balkans security framework would elevate its international profile and potentially make elements of it legally binding. UN agencies such as UNDP that are already involved in arms control (e.g., coordinating the small arms roadmap), could extend technical and financial support to this initiative, especially regarding broader control of arms trafficking aspects[387]. The other institutions and organizations could have been used for inspiration borrowing ideas from successful processes, for example, lessons from how ASEAN built habits of dialogue among mistrustful neighbors, or how Latin America established treaty regimes (like Tlatelolco for nuclear weapons) through external guarantors.

5.6. Address Political Challenges and Position the Balkans as a Global Arms Control Innovator

Implementation of a comprehensive framework in regions such as the Western Balkans would certainly face political and practical challenges. However, it is crucial to assess feasibility in the first place, while also recognizing the transformative potential if such a framework is realized. One major challenge is the varying political will among regional leaders. While all Western Balkan governments

[387] European Council, *Brussels Declaration*, 2024.

publicly “promote” regional stability, in practice some are unwilling to decrease their military capabilities or “abandon” their domestic policy of pursuing modernization. For instance, politicians in countries like Croatia, which has been evidently increasing defense spending and arms imports, might view certain arms control measures as limiting their strategic advantage. Nationalistic rhetoric, still present in domestic politics of countries in the region, could also complicate deep cooperation by presenting such cooperation as concession to rivals. In order to overcome such issues, the new framework’s design must emphasize reciprocity and collective benefits, since no state would disarm unilaterally, but rather all would be asked to take equivalent steps that mutually enhance regional security. One of the key features of such actions would be cost savings. Disarming would be beneficial for each country’s economy, since arms races are generally expensive, especially for small economies. Therefore, a regional pact can help re-channel funds from weapons into developments.

The Yugoslav conflict belongs to a series of modern European conflicts that arose following the Cold War, triggered by the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and fueled by ethnic divisions, territorial disputes, and the broader geopolitical realignments of the era. Many Balkan citizens have negative feelings about new security dynamics in the region, recalling the war of the 1990s. Especially its devastating impact on the region, where many citizens were deeply affected by memories of wartime atrocities, including mass violence and displacement. This trauma has sustained widespread distrust on region’s security dynamics, particularly amid contemporary trends of rearmament and geopolitical fragmentation. Therefore, many citizens remain war-scarred and would welcome genuine peace efforts. Civil society organizations, alongside independent media in each Western Balkan country, could significantly use these efforts by actively promoting the benefits of such initiatives. By emphasizing how positive regional cooperation and security measures strengthen human security—encompassing safety, economic stability, and social cohesion, they can gain public support and demonstrate a clear pathway toward improved living standards, paving the way for a more unified and prosperous future in the region.

Skepticism could be overcome by confidence built through initial measures, such as information exchange and joint training, creating a cycle where early success can enable deeper commitments. Similarly, joint training in the field of cyber defense or counter-drone simulations would build practical cooperation, allowing military and civilian officials to develop shared protocols and interpersonal trust. It is crucial that these measures align with guidelines set by other institutions and their programs, such as OSCE cyber CBMs and EU cyber diplomacy guidelines. By starting small and building early

achievements, the region can transform from a cycle of mistrust to one of collaboration, laying the foundation for normative models that could serve as a positive example of modern security cooperation.

Election cycles in Balkan countries can disrupt continuity of such processes. Even the well organized and negotiated agreement could be jeopardized if a new government comes to power on a more nationalist platform or simply seeks to undo a predecessor's policies. Many politicians avoid topics of disarmament, fearing that opponents will portray them as weak on national defense. For example, a leader who promotes a weapons limit and agree on inspections might be accused of its opponents of "selling out" sovereignty. These short-term political calculations can undermine long-term security gains. One way to mitigate this is to entrench commitments in bipartisan consensus – e.g., having major opposition parties co-sign or support the framework – so that a change of government does not mean a reversal of commitments. Additionally, involving parliamentary committees in overseeing the process can attach broader political ownership to the project, insulating it somewhat from electoral rhetoric.

Nevertheless, another major issue is "Kosovo's" status, which has disrupted many initiatives for cooperation in the past. Serbia's stance on the issue of "non-recognition" of Kosovo as their southern province, means any framework involving both must be crafted carefully. Moreover, Serbia most likely will not participate in a framework where Kosovo is granted full membership status of sovereign country. Solutions could involve signing the agreement in a multilateral context, so Serbia and Kosovo do not bilaterally sign with each other, but rather each sign onto on OSCE or UN brokered document. Signing onto the EU-brokered document also presents a potential problem for implementation, since the EU takes a hard stance on Kosovo's recognition, pushing Serbia to recognize it in order to join the Union. This approach can easily be thwarted. Therefore, the willingness to engage pragmatically is only possible under neutral auspice which would create a precedent. For instance, in the OSCE's documents, Kosovo is often mentioned with an asterisk and footnote, and Serbia and others have accepted this formula. Similarly, the 2020 Washington agreement with normalization accords emphasized direct security cooperation, with moratoria for Kosovo's international recognition campaign, all negotiated despite the status problem. This framework can serve as an inspiration for a new framework, where the parties can focus on technical security issues of shared interest, while "bracketing" the sovereignty question. Eventually, successfully implementing arms control framework

could contribute to easing political disputes in the region by building habits of communication, similar to Franco-German security cooperation post-1950 helped their political reconciliation[388].

An assisting factor in creating a successful framework could be the role of the external powers. It is uncertain whether the EU and most of the West will support such a project, building Balkan-led stability pact, however, most presumably, the pact would be beneficial for them. Furthermore, Russia's and China's perspective remains the same as the West's perspective. Nevertheless, rivalry of great powers could obstruct such cooperation, as Russia has historically objected to being excluded from European security initiatives and might perceive a Western Balkans framework as an "EU/NATO project" aimed at reducing Moscow's influence in Serbia or *Republika Srpska*. In the same manner, Europe has been experiencing increased "Russophobia" in the recent years, especially after the start of the Ukrainian war in 2022, where each step by Moscow could be understood as risk for collective European security[389]. To prevent such dynamics, the framework should remain open and transparent to outside observers. Inviting major powers to observe inspection exercises or to attend annual review meetings could reassure that this is cooperative security, not a block formation. Essentially, if managed correctly, Russia might welcome constraints that, for instance, cap NATO military presence in the region (this could be one negotiation point, perhaps the framework could address foreign troop deployments or bases in the Western Balkans, subjecting them to regional notification as well). China, as an arms supplier and investor in the region, has not been involved directly in security agreements, but it could be engaged diplomatically to support regional stability commitments. Eventually, the success of this framework does not require acceptance by Moscow or Beijing; however, their participation and involvement in such processes can improve the process overall, especially keeping the process within inclusive institutions like the OSCE (where they participate).

Despite these challenges, the political momentum for such an initiative may be growing. The decline in regional security since 2014, combined with lessons from Russia's war in Ukraine, has alerted Balkan leaders that status quo rivalries can spiral out of control. There is acknowledgement that no state in the region truly wins in an arms race, they all become more insecure and economically

[388] Beyond Intractability, "Huber: The Franco-German Relationship," 2020, https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/huber-franco-german-relationship (accessed May 12, 2025).
[389] Jason Wahlang, "Russophobia and the West: A Study on Europe Anti-Russian Sentiments," *International Journal of Russian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2021): 115–123, https://www.ijors.net/issue10_2_2021/pdf/__www.ijors.net_issue10_2_2021_article_5_wahlang.pdf (accessed May 15, 2025).

strained. This realization, documented by regional analysts, underpins recent calls for renewed dialogue and arms control in Southeast Europe[390]. Additionally, emphasizing the fact that the Dayton-era arms control has survived (even if limited in scope) shows a latent commitment to rules-based security is present. The proposed framework would offer a significant upgrade, since it is not built from scratch, but builds on prior agreements and ongoing cooperation (e.g., joint exercises under NATO Partnership for Peace, frequent meetings in the Berlin Process, etc.). In this way, the proposed framework would not be presented as something new and dramatic, rather a natural evolution of regional cooperation in line with other foreign institutions and international norms.

If achieved, even slightly, this Western Balkans security framework could signal the region's willingness and effort as a normative" innovator" in arms control. In a global context where many arms control regimes are eroding or demonstrate weak functioning, for instance, the INF Treaty collapsed, the CFE Treaty is almost "not active," great-power tensions hinder new agreements – a successful Balkans initiative would be remarkable. It would demonstrate that small states, often seen only as security consumers, can innovate and lead in managing military competition. For example, a Balkan Drone and Cyber Accord would be the first of its kind worldwide, potentially serving as a template for conflict-prone regions elsewhere. The Western Balkans, once synonymous with ethnic conflict, could recast itself as a laboratory of modern arms control solutions, much as post-WWII Scandinavia pioneered Nordic peace cooperation during the Cold War. Moreover, through aligning their framework with EU norms and international standards Balkan states strengthen their image as providers of stability in Europe. This normative power could have positive effects: the confidence-building techniques they refine might inform OSCE-wide updates to the Vienna Document or inspire new UN discussions on regulating emerging weapon technologies.

In conclusion, the path to a comprehensive regional security framework in the Western Balkans is challenging but achievable. By addressing the gaps of Dayton with creativity and leveraging both regional solidarity and international support, the Balkans can break the cycle of armament and mistrust. The proposed measures – from drone transparency and cyber cooperation to joint verification and institutionalized dialogue – offer a plan ("blueprint") for reducing the security dilemma that has been the key feature of the region. Significantly, these steps are not utopian; they draw on realistic

[390] Katarina Djokic, "Are the European NATO States Moving Towards Self-Reliance in Arms Procurement? A Q&A with Katarina Djokic," *SIPRI Commentary*, March 19, 2025, https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2025/are-european-nato-states-moving-towards-self-reliance-arms-procurement-qa-katarina-djokic (accessed May 15, 2025).

precedents and resources at hand. Political feasibility will ultimately depend on courageous leadership and the ability to convince domestic audiences that collective security is not a zero-sum game. Should the Western Balkans succeed in this endeavor, they would not only safeguard their own future but also contribute a much-needed success story to the field of international arms control. In an era of renewed global tension, a Western Balkans security framework that tames an arms race and fosters trust would indeed make this region a normative beacon, demonstrating how former adversaries can jointly chart a path to lasting peace and security.

Conclusion

Chapter 5 has proposed a comprehensive set of policy recommendations to neutralize the effects of the post-2014 arms race and reorient Western Balkans security dynamics towards cooperation. It started by acknowledging the limitations of the Dayton-era arrangements (5.1) in managing new threats and militarization trends. The chapter then outlined a new general framework (5.2) for regional arms control, premised on modernizing arms limits, inclusive multilateral engagement, and alignment with Euro-Atlantic security standards. The core of the chapter delved into specific, forward-looking measures: using emerging technologies responsibly, increasing transparency, creating institutional guardians, and anticipating challenges. In Section 5.3, the thesis emphasized the impact of emerging military technologies, with drones as a focal example of game-changing weapons. Comparative case studies (from the Middle East, Caucasus, and Africa) demonstrated how UAV proliferation can alter warfare and escalate tensions, underscoring the need for the Western Balkans to proactively address such technologies. The section also expanded on the imperatives of international humanitarian law in this context – arguing that new norms and oversight are needed to ensure technologies like armed drones do not erode the principles of distinction, proportionality, and accountability in the region's conflicts. Section 5.4 proposed concrete confidence-building measures, notably a pioneering Balkan Arms Transparency Platform. This envisioned digital reporting system, inspired by instruments like the OSCE Vienna Document and UN arms register, would institutionalize mutual transparency in armaments. By having states regularly disclose their military holdings and plans on a shared portal (subject to verification), the region can build trust and avoid dangerous misperceptions. Section 5.5 turned to institution-building: it detailed the design of a dedicated regional security institution to implement these ideas. Key recommendations included a fair financing model (combining national contributions with EU/UN support), a rotating leadership to ensure local ownership, and a suite of

functions ranging from on-site verification and legal advice to mediation of disputes and training for officials. This new body would serve as the custodian of any agreement – monitoring compliance, managing data exchanges, and providing a forum for dialogue when frictions arise. Section 5.6 candidly examined potential obstacles – from inconsistent political will and nationalist media narratives to unresolved bilateral disputes – that might hinder the framework's adoption. It suggested mitigation strategies such as engaging the public, phasing implementation, and anchoring the initiative to broader European integration processes to buffer against these challenges. In sum, Chapter 5 presents an ambitious yet pragmatic roadmap for regional security cooperation in the Western Balkans. Its recommendations form an integrated package: legal and technological insights inform confidence-building tools; those tools are backed by new institutions; and all are tempered by awareness of on-the-ground realities. Collectively, the proposals aim to move the region beyond reactive armament cycles and towards a stability regime grounded in transparency, mutual restraint, and continual dialogue. This forward-looking orientation aligns with the chapter's overarching argument – that enduring peace and security in the Balkans will only be achieved through cooperative measures that address both present dangers and future uncertainties, rebuilding trust one step at a time.

CONCLUSION

In the absence of a regional security framework, the Western Balkans has experienced a noticeable post-2014 arms buildup characterized by competitive military modernization and procurement across states. The thesis finds that each Western Balkan country has steadily increased defense spending and acquired new weaponry – from Serbia's purchase of advanced Russian and Chinese systems to Croatia's procurement of Western fighter jets – in a pattern that reflects a classic security dilemma. Lacking any arms control regime beyond the outdated Dayton-era limits, every national military upgrade is interpreted as a potential threat by neighbors, prompting them to respond in kind. This dynamic has evolved into a regional arms race: what began as individual efforts to enhance national security has become an interactive cycle of militarization. External powers have fueled this competition, as Russia and China deepen ties by supplying Serbia with arms while NATO and EU states enhance the arsenals of their Balkan partners. As a result, the region's security dynamic since 2014 is defined by mutual suspicion, heightened force posturing, and a drift away from the cooperative norms that stabilized the Balkans after the 1990s conflicts.

Crucially, these findings directly address the research question by illustrating how the arms race has developed in a regulatory vacuum and what risks it poses. The thesis demonstrates that without a comprehensive regional security framework, militarization in the Western Balkans has accelerated unchecked, outpacing confidence-building measures. The risks of future conflict are apparent. An unregulated arms buildup increases the chance that political crises or accidents could spiral into confrontation, given the more lethal and far-reaching capabilities now in play. For example, reciprocal procurements have already occurred – Serbia's announced purchase of S-300 air defenses and MiG-29 fighters was explicitly framed as a response to Croatia's acquisition of long-range rocket systems. Such action–reaction dynamics highlight the danger of miscalculation: what one state promotes as a defensive measure is seen as offensive by another, feeding worst-case assumptions. In sum, the post-2014 evolution of the Balkan arms race confirms the thesis's core argument: in the absence of an effective regional security architecture, states default to self-help and armament, thereby exacerbating regional insecurity and elevating the risk that any spark – amid unresolved disputes in Bosnia, Kosovo, or elsewhere – could ignite a broader conflict.

This research makes several important contributions to the scholarly literature on international security, arms control, and Balkan geopolitics. Theoretically, it enhances the application of neorealism

and security dilemma theory to post-conflict regional dynamics. By showing how Western Balkan states, in an anarchic setting without a security regime, have mirrored the predictions of neorealist thought, the thesis confirms the contemporary relevance of classical security-dilemma logic. It extends existing theory by integrating the role of external great-power influences into the regional security dilemma, illustrating how outside patronage and proxy competition compound the fear-driven arms acquisitions of local states. Moreover, the thesis engages with the concept of the "postmodern military," linking advances in military technology (drones, cyber capabilities) to traditional power-balancing theory – thereby offering a nuanced theoretical lens that bridges traditional realist security models with modern military innovation.

Methodologically, the study contributes a comparative and cross-disciplinary approach to examining regional militarization. It combines quantitative data on arms transfers and defense expenditures with qualitative analysis of national defense strategies and geopolitical influences. This multi-method design – including case studies of each Western Balkan country's post-2014 defense policy – provides a more fine-grained understanding of arms racing than prior studies that looked at the Balkans only in aggregate. The thesis also leverages historical institutional analysis (e.g. the legacy of the Yugoslav military-industrial complex and the limitations of the Dayton Peace Accords) to contextualize contemporary developments. This methodological integration of data analysis with contextual political-military history represents a blueprint for studying arms races in other regions, marrying empirical rigor with regional expertise.

Empirically, the thesis offers original insights and information that advances the knowledge of Balkan security affairs. It compiles and analyzes a new dataset of post-2014 militarization indicators – including weapons acquisitions, defense budgets, and military modernizations across six Western Balkan states – thereby filling a notable gap in the literature. Previous researches often ended with the early 2000s post-war stabilization; this study updates the record through 2025, demonstrating that a notable rearmament trend has emerged. In doing so, it documents specific developments (such as Serbia's "Project 5000" force expansion, Croatia's fighter jet purchases, and smaller states' niche capability upgrades) that have not been systematically covered elsewhere. The research also provides empirical evidence of the security vacuum left by weak regional institutions: for instance, it highlights how no new arms control agreements or confidence-building measures were instituted even as military procurements surged. By empirically linking these facts to outcomes – rising tensions and arms posturing – the thesis offers a holistic account of the Western Balkans arms race. This contributes to

both Balkan geopolitical studies and the broader field of arms control by illustrating, with concrete data, how an arms race unfolds in a real-world region lacking regulatory frameworks.

The findings carry serious implications for the Western Balkans and for international security policy. Most immediately, the thesis signals that the unregulated militarization of the Western Balkans is an uncertain path, one that could undermine the fragile peace established after the 1990s wars. As each state prioritizes national defense in isolation, opportunities for misunderstanding and mistrust proliferate. The erosion of transparency and trust – evident in how military exercises or troop movements are now viewed with alarm by neighbors – means that the region's stability rests on a knife's edge. Should a political crisis erupt (for example, a flare-up in Kosovo–Serbia relations or a governance breakdown in Bosnia and Herzegovina), the widespread availability of modern weaponry increases the likelihood of escalation beyond what past skirmishes entailed. In essence, an arms race in this post-conflict region magnifies the destructive potential of any future conflict, making diplomatic containment far more difficult once violence breaks out. This underscores a grim lesson: allowing a security dilemma to fester in a region with unresolved ethnic and political disputes heightens the risk of those disputes turning violent.

Beyond the local context, the Western Balkans' experience serves as a cautionary case for global arms control and regional security regimes. The absence of a functioning regional security framework in the Balkans – unlike, say, in Northern Europe or Central Europe where multilateral arms control has been more robust – demonstrates how quickly a vacuum gets filled by competitive arming. It highlights the importance of international institutions and agreements: without updating and expanding frameworks like the Dayton Article IV limitations, states will arm unilaterally, and the entire region's peace becomes contingent on a volatile balance of power. Furthermore, the thesis's findings on external power competition have implications for great-power politics. The Balkans have effectively become a small-scale theatre for Russia, China, the EU, and NATO to vie for influence, often through military aid or arms sales. This external rivalry not only exacerbates regional tensions (as each local actor aligns with a patron and embarks on rival armament programs) but also complicates conflict resolution – any local conflict could draw in opposing outside interests, making containment much harder. The implication is clear: international actors must recognize that their military assistance or sales can feed to a security dilemma, and thus should coordinate and exercise restraint in the Balkans to avoid inadvertently stoking an arms race they cannot control.

On a positive note, the research also implies that there is urgent need and room for policy intervention. The Western Balkans case suggests that confidence-building and arms control measures – such as greater transparency in defense procurements, communication hotlines, limits on certain high-risk weapon systems, and third-party mediation – could significantly reduce the dangers identified. The thesis's policy recommendations (e.g. a Balkan Arms Transparency Platform and a dedicated regional security institution) reflect the finding that building mutual reassurance is possible even amid competition, if regional leaders and international supporters commit to it. In a broader sense, strengthening regional security cooperation in the Balkans would not only mitigate the local arms race but also contribute to European stability, showing that post-conflict regions need not be doomed to recurring security dilemmas. The implication for international arms control regimes is that tailored, region-specific frameworks may be necessary to address unique post-conflict conditions – a one-size-fits-all approach (like applying generic EU or OSCE mechanisms) may leave gaps, as happened in the Balkans. Thus, this thesis urges policymakers to treat unregulated arms races as urgent security threats and to devote diplomatic capital to preventive arms control initiatives in vulnerable regions before crises erupt.

While this thesis provides a comprehensive analysis, it also faces certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, there are data constraints inherent in studying military affairs in this region. Reliable and up-to-date information on arms transfers, defense spending, and capability upgrades can be difficult to obtain, as some governments lack transparency or classify significant portions of their defense programs. For example, open-source data had to be supplemented with estimates, and smaller *states like *Kosovo had very limited historical data (with a formal army only established in 2018). These data gaps make it challenging to track the arms race with complete precision. Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented defense governance – split along ethnic lines – complicated the analysis of its military posture. The study had to rely on secondary sources and available documents, which may not capture clandestine procurements or the full scope of security sector developments. Additionally, some aspects of national defense strategies remain unclear due to classified information and limited access to insider perspectives. The research thus had to infer intentions from outcomes (e.g. inferring strategic doctrine from procurement patterns), which, while reasonable, is not a perfect substitute for direct insight from defense planners.

Secondly, the thesis's scope is geographically and temporally bounded, focusing on the Western Balkans in the decade after 2014. This focused scope enabled depth of analysis, but it also means the

findings should be generalized with caution. The Western Balkans has unique historical and political conditions – other post-conflict regions (for instance, the South Caucasus or parts of the Middle East) may experience arms races differently due to different great-power dynamics or local security architectures. Future research could fruitfully explore whether the patterns observed here hold in other contexts. Comparative studies could examine, say, the Caucasus or sub-Saharan Africa, asking if regions without strong security frameworks similarly fall into security dilemmas and arms races. Such research would test the external validity of this thesis's conclusions and potentially refine our understanding of post-conflict militarization under anarchy.

Moreover, future studies might overcome some data limitations by employing qualitative and insider methods – for example, conducting interviews with military officials, defense ministry insiders, or regional security experts to gain deeper insight into decision-making rationales behind arms procurements. Access to such perspectives could validate or challenge the thesis's inference that these states are driven largely by insecurity and external influence. Longitudinal analyses as more data emerges (for instance, tracking the arms race beyond 2025) would also be valuable, to see if trends identified here continue, plateau, or reverse in response to diplomatic efforts or shifting geopolitics. Additionally, further research could delve into areas this study touched only briefly, such as the role of emerging technologies and cyber capabilities in regional security – topics that may become even more salient in the near future. Finally, investigating the societal dimension – how domestic publics perceive the arms race, and whether nationalist narratives are mobilizing support for militarization – could add an important layer to understanding the political sustainability of the current trajectory. These lines of inquiry would build on this thesis's foundation, addressing its limitations and broadening the scholarly conversation on arms races in vulnerable regions.

In closing, this research underscores the enduring significance of neorealist insights – and the security dilemma in particular – in explaining contemporary regional security dynamics. The post-2014 arms race in the Western Balkans serves as a vivid reminder that, even in a world transformed by globalization and new technology, the fundamental anxieties identified by realist theory remain potent: without trustworthy institutions and mutual guarantees, states will inexorably seek security through power, inadvertently undermining the security of all. This thesis has shown how the Western Balkans, a region scarred by past conflicts, has relapsed into competitive armament in the shadow of great-power rivalry, validating classical theories of power-balancing but in a modern guise. Yet, it also contributes a hopeful perspective to the scholarly debate. Consistent with the literature on the security dilemma, the

findings imply that recognizing the dilemma is the first step toward defusing it. By diagnosing the post-2014 militarization as a shared predicament rather than one state's ambition alone, this work aligns with broader scholarly arguments (from Herz to Jervis and Booth & Wheeler) that security dilemmas can be mitigated by confidence-building, communication, and institutions rather than exacerbated by arms alone.

Ultimately, the significance of this research lies in its dual message of warning and encouragement. On one hand, it warns that the Western Balkans' peace will remain fragile so long as states continue to arm without coordination – a stark lesson to international security scholars and practitioners about the costs of neglecting regional arms control. On the other hand, it highlights pathways to escape the dilemma, reinforcing the broader normative call for cooperative security regimes in post-conflict regions. In an era when global tensions are rising, the Western Balkan case offers a microcosm of both the perils of unchecked arms competition and the potential benefits if collective security can take root. The thesis thereby connects back to the wider scholarly conversation on war and peace: it affirms that even entrenched rivalries can be tempered by enlightened policy grounded in mutual restraint, and it challenges future researchers to build on this example. By illuminating how a security dilemma has unfolded in the Western Balkans – and how it might be tamed – this work contributes to a deeper understanding of arms race dynamics in post-conflict settings. It is a call to action for regional leaders and international stakeholders alike to apply the lessons of neorealism constructively: to break the cycle of fear and armament through dialogue, transparency, and the hard work of building trust. In sum, the Western Balkans' post-2014 arms race is not just a regional issue but a testament to enduring IR theories and a pressing invitation to translate scholarly insights into practical solutions for peace.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This master's thesis investigates the resurgence of competitive militarization in the Western Balkans after 2014, a period marked by renewed defense spending and arms acquisitions among countries of the region. The central research question guiding the study asks: How has the post-2014 arms race in the Western Balkans evolved, and what risks does it pose for future conflict? To answer this, the thesis adopts a neorealist lens of international relations—focusing on how the anarchic international system and the absence of a regional security framework drive state behavior. A key concept is the security dilemma, which posits that when one state arms itself for protection, others interpret this as a threat and respond by arming in turn. This feedback loop can unintentionally heighten tensions and insecurity for all sides. By applying these theories, the thesis analyses the pattern of action–reaction armament in the Balkans and the role of great-power rivalry in exacerbating local insecurities. The research uses a mixed-method approach: quantitative data on defense budgets and arms imports provide evidence of the militarization trend, while qualitative analysis of national security strategies and foreign policy decisions helps explain each state's motives. This theoretical and methodological framework sets the stage for understanding the dynamics of the post-2014 arms race.

A historical review reveals that current militarization trends cannot be understood in isolation from the past. Under socialist Yugoslavia (1945–1991), the region had a robust military-industrial complex and large armed forces, making it a major arms producer and a militarized society during the Cold War. Factories like Serbia's *Zastava* Arms, Croatia's *Đuro Đaković*, and Bosnia's *Soko* aircraft plant once formed a self-sufficient weapons industry for Yugoslavia. After the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, international efforts sought to prevent another arms race. The Dayton Peace Accords (1995) that ended the Bosnian war included an arms control agreement (the 1996 Florence Agreement under Dayton's Article IV) which imposed limits on heavy weapons for the former Yugoslav states and mandated transparency measures under OSCE supervision. In the timeframe between the late 1990s and 2000s, these measures effectively limited military capabilities while increasing mutual trust. However, by 2014 this post-war arms control regime had effectively expired or become outdated - international monitoring declined, and the agreement did not count for new types of weapons or new states (like *Kosovo). The absence of a modern regional arms control framework after 2014 left a vacuum. At the same time, global geopolitics underwent significant changes: Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and decline in East–West relations signaled a return of great-power tensions. This

global shift affected the Balkans, historically a contested sphere of influence. Therefore, between 2014–2015, the combination of weakening arms control measures and rising geopolitical rivalry created the stage for a renewed arms race in the Western Balkans. Following 2014, each Western Balkan country created its own path in response to perceived security challenges, yet a common thread is the military modernization and buildup across the region. The thesis presents detailed case studies of six Western Balkan states - Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia - revealing how their defense strategies differed and how, collectively, these trends add to a regional militarization race.

Serbia has positioned itself at the center of the post-2014 arms buildup. Officially militarily neutral and not aligned with NATO standards, Serbia has pursued ways to strengthen its armed forces to ensure it can defend its interests independently. After 2014, strategically surrounded by neighboring countries joining NATO and confronted with emerging threats (such as *Kosovo's moves to establish its own armed forces), Serbia undertook a major military reform and rearmament program. Defense spending increased significantly - Serbia's budget nearly doubled over the decade, reaching around $1.4–1.5 billion by the early 2020s - enabling the procurement of modern weapons. Belgrade acquired advanced systems from its traditional partner Russia (e.g. modern anti-aircraft systems like the Pantsir-S1 and additional combat aircraft) and increasingly from China, which provided drones and surface-to-air missiles. These acquisitions, some representing a hundreds-of-percent increase in arms imports compared to the early 2010s, made Serbia one of the top arms importers in the world for its size. The Serbian government justifies this buildup as necessary to maintain a balance of power and protect Serbian interests (for instance, deterring any threat from Kosovo or a sudden regional crisis). However, Serbia's rapid military modernization – including plans to purchase cutting-edge fighter jets (notably a deal for French Rafale multirole aircraft) – has alarmed its neighbors. Serbia's strategy of "armed neutrality" has essentially meant balancing East and West: it conducts military exercises and buys weapons from Russia and China, even as it also seeks closer economic ties with the EU. This approach has allowed Serbia to build the most formidable military capability in the region outside of NATO, but it has also intensified a regional action–reaction cycle.

Since joining NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013, Croatia has focused on modernizing its defense capabilities to align with Western standards. After a period of defense cuts following the 2008 financial crisis, Croatia reversed course mid-2010s in response to both NATO commitments and regional developments. The 2014 NATO Summit in Wales set a goal for members to spend 2% of GDP

on defense - a goal Croatia adopted. At the same time, Croatian leaders raised concerns of Serbia's military procurement from Russia (for example, Serbia's acquisition of fighter jets and missiles in 2014–2016) and by broader instability to the east. Croatia presents its efforts as modernization attempt rather than an arms race - focusing on replacing outdated Yugoslav-era equipment to meet NATO standards. In essence, this has involved ambitious procurements that also serve as a strategic counterbalance. Croatia launched a long-term defense development plan (2015–2024) and consistently raised its budget (nearly doubling defense spending by 2021–2022). Notable acquisitions include the purchase of 12 Dassault Rafale fighter jets from France - a €1.2 billion deal marking Croatia's largest ever military procurement, aimed at giving it a modern air force as older MiG-21 fighters became outdated. Croatia also received donations of US-made helicopters and invested in Western artillery, air defenses, and infantry equipment, phasing out remaining Soviet-era armaments. By 2024, Croatia's defense spending was approximately the 2% of GDP, demonstrating its commitment to collective security. From Croatia's perspective, these upgrades are about fulfilling NATO guidelines and protecting itself in a changing security environment. Nevertheless, the equivalent rearmament of Serbia and Croatia has often been portrayed as a reciprocal arms race, with each side's moves portrayed by the other as justification for further upgrades. Even if Croatian officials emphasize NATO interoperability over competition, the net effect has been a heightened rivalry: for example, Serbia reacted to Croatia's Rafale deal by accelerating its own jet procurement plans. This dynamic exemplifies the security dilemma at work.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) presents a stark contrast: it has not significantly rearmed and in fact struggles with a stagnant, under-funded military. The thesis describes Bosnia's defense posture as paralyzed by internal political divisions. Since the 1995 Dayton Accords, Bosnia's state military has been relatively small and tightly limited by the peace agreement's terms. Post-2014, while neighbors went on to modernize, Bosnia's armed forces saw minimal investment – defense spending remained around or below 1% of GDP (one of the lowest levels in Europe). Efforts to update Bosnia's national security strategies or pursue NATO membership have stalled due to disagreement between the country's two entities: the Federation (dominated by Bosniaks and Croats) and Republika Srpska (dominated by Serbs). Bosniak and Croat politicians favor NATO integration and military reform, whereas Republika Srpska's leadership vehemently opposes joining NATO and has often blocked common defense initiatives. As a result, Bosnia's official defense policy documents (dating back to 2008) went unrevised for years, and a 2017–2027 modernization plan exists mostly on paper with

almost no implementation by 2025. Practically, the Bosnian military is aging: it still uses largely 1980s Yugoslav-origin equipment (tanks, artillery, rifles) with only piecemeal updates. Nearly all defense budget goes to personnel and maintenance, leaving under 5% for new equipment. One of the few notable upgrades was facilitated by external aid – for instance, the US provided a grant for new utility helicopters to replace Bosnia's obsolete fleet. Fundamentally, Bosnia and Herzegovina's inability to modernize alongside its neighbors underscores how political conflict and fragmentation have hampered its security capacity. While this means Bosnia is not an active participant in the regional arms race, it also makes it a potential weak link: its limited military capability and fractured governance could invite external interference or become a flashpoint if ethnic tensions worsen. The thesis highlights Bosnia as a reminder that unresolved internal disputes (in this case, the legacy of Dayton's ethnic power-sharing) can freeze a country's security posture in place even as the strategic environment shifts around it.

Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro – the smaller Western Balkan states that are all NATO members – have followed a different trajectory focused on alliance integration and selective modernization. These countries do not perceive an immediate military threat from neighbors in the way Serbia and Croatia eye each other, but they have still increased defense efforts post-2014 in response to general regional instability and NATO obligations. Albania, a NATO member since 2009, views the Alliance as its primary security guarantor and has worked to meet NATO's standards. Updated National Security Strategy in 2014 and a Defense Strategy in 2020 emphasize new threats like cyber-attacks and terrorism (especially after Albania itself suffered a major cyberattack in 2022). Albanian defense spending increased notably - from roughly 1.1% of GDP in 2014 to about 2% by 2024 - reflecting both economic growth and a policy commitment to reach NATO's spending target. With a modest budget (around $200–250 million in recent years), Albania focused on professionalizing its forces and replacing outdated Soviet-era equipment through Western assistance. Key improvements include acquiring modern helicopters (such as Black Hawks from the United States and Cougars from France) and upgrading air surveillance infrastructure (for example, renovating the Kuçovë Air Base with NATO support to host Allied exercises). Albania has also pursued purchases of advanced systems like drones to enhance its capabilities, often in cooperation with partners like Turkey and the US. Montenegro and North Macedonia, which joined NATO in 2017 and 2020 respectively, similarly reoriented their defense policies around alliance membership. Montenegro, a very small country, eliminated major heavy weapon systems (for instance, it has no fighter aircraft and relies on NATO air-policing) and focused on niche contributions to NATO and internal security reforms. It adopted new security

strategies after joining NATO, emphasizing collective defense, cyber resilience, and the rule of law in the security sector. Montenegro's defense budget has grown modestly post-2014 and remains small in absolute terms, but the country has benefitted from NATO training and some modernization of light weaponry and coastal patrol assets. North Macedonia had a long path to NATO due to its name dispute with Greece, but once that was resolved in 2018, it swiftly acceded to the Alliance in 2020. During 2014–2020, anticipating membership, North Macedonia undertook significant defense reforms: a Strategic Defense Review in 2018 paved the way for downsizing old Soviet-inherited systems and adopting NATO-standard organization. By 2024 North Macedonia also reached about 2% of GDP on defense (up from hardly 1% in 2014), enabling investments in modern equipment despite a small economy. A crucial decision was North Macedonia's donation of all its remaining third-generation main battle tanks to Ukraine in 2022, signaling a shift away from outdated legacy equipment and a desire to modernize through allied support. In place of outdated tanks and aircraft, the country has focused on improving infantry, special forces, and transport capabilities for interoperability in NATO missions. In summary, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro have "Westernized" their militaries over the past decade - prioritizing NATO integration, training, and new domains like cyber defense. By arming, the target was not neighboring states, but their upgrades (often funded or equipped by NATO allies), which contribute to the overall regional trend of military renewal. Their alignment with NATO also politically divides the region's security landscape, reinforcing a bloc of Western-integrated states distinct from militarily neutral Serbia and the unresolved case of Bosnia. This division is one of the factors driving Serbia to pursue greater capabilities, emphasizing how even defensive moves by one group of states can be perceived as threatening by others.

An integral part of the post-2014 Western Balkans arms race is the role of external actors. Chapter 3 of the thesis details how great powers and international organizations have influenced, and often intensified, the region's security competition. On one side, the Euro-Atlantic actors – NATO, the United States, and the European Union – have expanded their presence, while on the other side, Russia and China (and to a regional extent Turkey) have pursued their own strategic agendas. These external influences serve as both drivers of militarization and sources of alignment for local states:

NATO's enlargement into the Balkans has been a defining factor. The Alliance extended security guarantees to Slovenia (2004), then Albania and Croatia (2009), Montenegro (2017), and North Macedonia (2020). These expansions offered security to new members but also sharpened Serbia's feeling of encirclement and loss of influence. NATO's presence comes with military

assistance: the US in particular, as the leading NATO power, has provided training, donations of surplus equipment, and funding for defense reforms in member and partner states. For example, the United States has given aircraft, vehicles, and arms to Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania to bolster their capabilities. Joint exercises hosted in the Western Balkans under NATO auspices have increased in frequency, integrating local forces with NATO standards. While NATO's official aim is to stabilize the region by integrating it into Euro-Atlantic structures, Russia (and some local critics) view these moves as provocative encroachment. The thesis notes that US diplomacy was also pivotal in brokering the Dayton Accords in 1995 and the Kosovo peacekeeping deployment (KFOR), underscoring that Western military engagement in the Balkans is not new. However, post-2014 the East–West rift has given NATO's role a more competitive edge – Western aid for Balkan militaries often directly counters Russian influence. American and NATO support has enabled the smaller states to modernize faster (as seen with donated helicopters or the construction of new training centers), thereby indirectly pressuring Serbia to seek alternative patrons or ramp up self-reliance.

The EU is not primarily a military actor, but it plays a significant political role in regional security. The EU's enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans (with all six countries nominally on track for EU membership) serves as an incentive for peace and reforms. The thesis points out that the EU has contributed through instruments like the European Peace Facility and various security assistance missions. For instance, EU funds have supported demining, police training, and even some defense capacity-building in the Balkans. Brussels also facilitates dialogue in flashpoints – notably hosting the ongoing Serbia–Kosovo negotiations aimed at normalizing relations. However, the EU's influence has limits: it lacks hard power in the region and often relies on NATO for security guarantees. Nonetheless, EU conditionality has encouraged states like Croatia and Albania to adopt defense reforms and good-neighborly policies. The EU has also promoted regional cooperation initiatives (such as the Berlin Process or Common Regional Market) which, while economic in focus, create forums where security concerns can be discussed. In sum, the EU's role is more about preventing conflict through integration and political pressure, complementing NATO's military backing. Failure or delays in the EU accession process, though, can breed frustration (as seen in Serbia or Bosnia), which sometimes pushes those countries to hedge by turning to rival powers.

Russia has long regarded the Balkans as within its historic sphere of interest and has acted as a patron to the region's Slavic and Orthodox populations, particularly Serbia and the Bosnian Serbs. After 2014, as Russia's confrontation with the West intensified, Moscow doubled down on preventing

further NATO expansion and maintaining influence in the Balkans. The thesis outlines several methods of Russian involvement: arms transfers and donations (such as supplying Serbia with fighter jets, attack helicopters, tanks, and air defense systems often at discounted rates or via loans), regular joint military exercises with Serbia (and Republika Srpska's police forces), and a strong diplomatic/media presence that reinforces Serbian narratives. Russia portrays itself as a security partner alternative to the West – for example, it helped equip Serbia's military with modernized MiG-29 aircraft and other hardware that Serbia could not easily get from Western sources. Politically, Russia uses its UN Security Council veto to support Serbia's stance on Kosovo (blocking Kosovo's UN membership) and to shield Republika Srpska's autonomy in Bosnia. The Kremlin has also been accused of covert operations, such as the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016 aimed at derailing Montenegro's NATO accession. Overall, Russian influence exacerbates the arms race by encouraging Serbia (and Bosnian Serbs) to resist Western-led security integration. Serbia's deepening military cooperation with Russia prompted concern in NATO capitals and, reciprocally, spurred neighboring countries to tighten their Western alignment. This external tug-of-war thus feeds regional tensions: every Russian missile system or radar delivered to Serbia is perceived in Croatia or Kosovo as a new threat, potentially requiring a countermeasure.

In the past decade, China emerged as a new strategic player in the Western Balkans. While China's engagement is primarily economic (through infrastructure investments and loans as part of the Belt and Road Initiative), it has increasingly ventured into security cooperation, especially with Serbia. The thesis notes that China made its first military forays into Europe via Serbia – selling Belgrade armed drones (the CH-92A, for example) and export versions of Chinese missile systems, as well as providing surveillance equipment and technology. China's approach emphasizes high-tech and economic tools: building telecommunications networks (Huawei's presence), smart-city surveillance systems, and even joint police training initiatives. Unlike Russia's overt geopolitical stance, China frames its involvement as business-oriented and non-interventionist, which appeals to leaders in Serbia and other states looking for investment without political strings. However, Chinese arms sales and donations have added a new layer to the arms buildup. The introduction of inexpensive combat drones in the Balkans (through Chinese models acquired by Serbia and reportedly desired by others) potentially changes the military balance and can spur neighboring states to acquire similar capabilities from Western suppliers or Turkey. Additionally, China's no-questions-asked arms deals avoid the human-rights conditions that EU/NATO arms might carry, giving local governments more leeway in

how they use new technologies. Beijing's influence remains limited compared to Russia or NATO, but it is significant as a rising factor: it diversifies Serbia's arsenal and underscores the multipolar nature of external competition in the region since 2014.

A long-standing regional player, Turkey bridges the Western and Muslim worlds and has historical ties to the Balkans. As a NATO member, Turkey officially supports Alliance policies in the region, but it also pursues its own influence, particularly among Muslim-majority communities (Bosniaks, Albanians, and other Islamic heritage groups). Turkish influence is seen through military training programs, arms deals, and diplomatic sponsorship. Ankara has provided military aid or equipment to Albania, Kosovo's security forces, and Bosnia's army, and has engaged in joint exercises. Turkey's defense industry exports – for instance, Bayraktar TB2 drones – are increasingly sought after, and there have been discussions or initial steps for sales of these drones to Albania and possibly other Balkan partners. Culturally and politically, Turkey positions itself as a protector of Muslims in the region (e.g. staunch support for Bosnia's integrity and for Kosovo's recognition), which sometimes places it at odds with Serbian and Russian interests. The thesis implies that Turkey, while allied with the West, adds another external vector that can embolden certain states: for example, if Bosnia or Kosovo expect Turkish support, they might feel more confident in their security stance vis-à-vis Serbia. Conversely, Turkey's growing clout might alarm Belgrade or Zagreb if they see it tipping the local balance. Nonetheless, Turkey generally operates within the Western framework (it supports NATO missions in the Balkans and EU-led initiatives), so it can also act as a mediator. In summary, Turkey's involvement emphasize that the region's militarization is shaped not just by West-Russia rivalry dynamics but by a complex interplay of multiple actors with intertwined alliances.

Collectively, these external influences often reinforce the security dilemma in the Western Balkans. Each local state's decision to align with either Western institutions (like NATO or the EU) or rival powers (such as Russia or China) like in case for Serbia, however; both widens the existing strategic divisions. Arms transfers from NATO or Russia directly increases accumulation of weaponry, while political support from great powers can harden local resistance to compromise (for instance, hardliners in Bosnia or Kosovo may feel encouraged by support from their external allies, making compromises harder). The thesis discovers that the Western Balkans' post-2014 arms race is not purely the result of internal regions' politics – it is closely tied to this external contest. Any attempt to reduce the regional arms race, therefore, must contend with and involve these outside actors rather than ignore them. Using the neorealist and security dilemma framework, the thesis assesses how the current

militarization might lead to misperceptions and escalation. In a region still affected by the 1990s wars, trust between governments remains low. There are several unresolved disputes and flashpoints - notably the status of *Kosovo and the internal governance of Bosnia and Herzegovina - which could "fire up" if combined with the ongoing arms buildup. The security dilemma logic is clear: measures that one state considers defensive can appear aggressive to others, prompting a reciprocal response. The result is a cycle of armament that leaves all parties feeling more insecure despite their new weapons. One major risk highlighted is that crisis situations could spiral into conflict more quickly now than a decade ago. For example, in recent years tensions between Serbia and *Kosovo have periodically occurred (over issues like border controls, minority rights, and mutual non-recognition). Both sides have stronger security forces than before: Serbia, with its newly acquired jets, helicopters, and artillery, and *Kosovo, with an army growing out of its Security Force and backed by some NATO members' training. In a future standoff - for instance, over an incident in Serb-majority northern Kosovo, these enhanced capabilities and the confidence gained from "protector's" support (Russia for Serbia, NATO for Kosovo) raise the stakes. What might once have been a controlled diplomatic dispute could risk a military confrontation if either side miscalculates or overreacts, expecting it to achieve its aims by force. NATO peacekeepers (KFOR) remain in Kosovo as a buffer, but the presence of more advanced weaponry on each side means any breakdown of the peace would be harder to control and more destructive. Similarly, Bosnia's political crisis - where Republika Srpska's leadership periodically threatens secession and state institutions are gridlocked - could be exacerbated by the regional arms race. Even though Bosnia itself isn't rearming, neighboring Serbia and Croatia have ties to Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat factions respectively. Increased armaments in those patron states, along with nationalist rhetoric, heighten the fear and uncertainty among Bosnia's communities. The thesis discusses scenarios in which, for instance, a unilateral move by Republika Srpska (encouraged by Serbia or Russia) might provoke unrest; Croatia might then talk of protecting Bosnian Croats, etc. In such a scenario, the militaries of Serbia and Croatia - now both more capable than in the early 2000s - could be indirectly drawn in or at least mobilize along borders, raising the risk of interstate clashes that could echo the 1990s if unchecked. Other risks come from emerging military technologies making their way into the Balkans. The introduction of combat drones, cyber warfare capabilities, and long-range precision weapons (which were not factors in earlier Balkan conflicts) could lower the threshold for escalation. Drones, for instance, allow constant surveillance and the option of strikes, with the possibility to avoid responsibility by making accusations hard to prove. If one state flies' drones near a border for "security," the neighbor might interpret it as preparation for attack. Cyber-attacks between

these countries or by their proxies could target critical infrastructure, potentially stimulating a real-world military response if damage is severe. Without communication and trust, these new domains become potential initial points for conflict in a tense environment. In essence, the security dilemma in the Western Balkans after 2014 demonstrates as a regional arms race that no one explicitly wanted but all feel obliged to participate in. Each government sees its military build-up as a rational response to external threats - whether that threat is a rival ethnic group, a neighboring state, or the influence of a great power. Furthermore, collectively, these actions are reinforcing mistrust. The thesis warns that if current trends continue uncontrolled, the region could face a dangerous tipping point where deterrence fails: a crisis could escalate because each side believes it can or must use force, and external powers might be pulled in, given their deep involvement. This would undermine the peace of the past two decades. Even without direct full-scale conflict, the arms race drains limited funds from developing economies into military spending. This not only deepens mutual distrust but also undermines collaboration on critical challenges. The geopolitical risk, therefore, is not only war, but also a persistent instability that keeps the Western Balkans on the periphery of Europe, vulnerable to manipulation by outside interests. In its final chapter, the thesis moves from analysis to solutions, proposing a set of policy recommendations to defuse the arms race and mitigate the security dilemma in the Western Balkans. These recommendations are grounded in the research findings - they seek to address both the structural causes (lack of regional security architecture and great-power interference) and the historical legacies (unresolved conflicts and outdated agreements) that fuel militarization. The summary of key recommendations includes:

A top priority is updating the Dayton-era arms control framework to current realities. The thesis suggests revitalizing the 1996 Florence Agreement (Dayton's Article IV limits on heavy weapons) by expanding its scope. New limits or guidelines should cover not just tanks and artillery, but also emerging technologies and arsenals currently unregulated - such as drones, advanced missiles, cyber warfare capabilities, and other modern "disruptive" weapons. A renewed arms control agreement, specifically tailored for the Western Balkans, could be negotiated with the backing of international organizations (OSCE, UN, EU). This would re-establish transparency and restraint: countries would declare and possibly cap certain weapon holdings, and agree to notify neighbors of major acquisitions or military exercises. Modernizing Dayton also means acknowledging new states and actors (for example, including Kosovo in some form, and accepting that all ex-Yugoslav states plus Albania need

to be at the table). By placing guardrails on the arms buildup, such a framework would reduce fear of sudden military imbalances and signal a collective commitment to stability.

To establish and maintain arms control, the thesis proposes creating a permanent regional security commission or forum for the Western Balkans. This body - which one might call a Western Balkans Security and Arms Control Commission - would include representatives from all six countries (and possibly observers from the EU, US, Russia, and others as needed). Its mandate would be to oversee compliance with arms control agreements, facilitate confidence-building measures, and serve as a platform for resolving security grievances through dialogue rather than unilateral action. Such an institution could be a result of existing initiatives (like the South-East Europe Cooperation Process) but focused explicitly on hard security. Regular meetings, joint working groups, and even joint military exercises or training programs under this regional umbrella could help build trust among formerly rival militaries. Over time, this commission could evolve into a broader regional security community, reducing the dependence of each state on external patrons by fostering natural cooperation. The thesis acknowledges political obstacles - particularly the need for Serbia and NATO members to work together despite mistrust - but argues that a neutral, inclusive forum is essential to break the cycle of suspicion.

Alongside formal arms limits, a range of practical confidence-building measures (CBMs) are recommended. These include things such as mutual exchanges of information on defense budgets and procurement plans (so no country feels caught off guard by a neighbor's new weapons purchase), invitations to observe each other's military exercises, and establishing a regional arms registry or database accessible to all governments. One innovative idea is a real-time data exchange system - perhaps an electronic notification mechanism - where any movement of significant military units or deployment of new systems would be communicated to all signatories, reducing the risk of misinterpretation. Joint training or exchange programs for officers could also humanize the "other side" and create personal networks that facilitate communication in crises. The thesis emphasizes transparency as an antidote to the rumor-fueled fears that drive arms races. If Western Balkan states openly share what they are acquiring and why, it becomes easier to discern defensive moves from offensive ones and to address concerns through diplomacy. Over the past decade, a lack of transparency has been evident (many arms deals were announced suddenly and with nationalist fanfare), so reversing that trend is crucial. International partners like OSCE have experience in designing such CBMs (e.g.,

drawing on OSCE's Vienna Document mechanisms), and their support could lend credibility and technical help.

The thesis recognizes that technical arms control will not hold if underlying political conflicts remain unresolved. Therefore, it recommends renewed efforts to settle or soften the region's enduring disputes - especially the Serbia-Kosovo relationship and Bosnia's internal constitutional tension - as part of the security improvement process. A phased approach is advised, wherein small steps are taken to build confidence before tackling final status issues. For Serbia and Kosovo, this might mean implementing existing agreements (like establishing the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities in Kosovo to give Serb communities a degree of self-management) and in return having Kosovo's government and its Western backers guarantee the rights and security of Serbs in the North. As trust builds, Serbia could gradually reduce its military posturing near the Kosovo boundary, and Kosovo could formally renounce any armed operations without NATO coordination. International mediators (EU, US, possibly with observer input from Russia/Turkey for buy-in) would need to ensure both sides move in sync. In Bosnia's case, confidence-building could involve all sides committing to refrain from inflammatory moves (e.g., Republika Srpska halting secessionist steps, the Federation refraining from pushing centralization that violates Dayton) and instead working within a dialogue - possibly facilitated by the proposed regional security forum. The thesis also highlights involving civil society and local communities in peacebuilding, to create a grassroots demand for stability that political leaders cannot ignore. Ultimately, resolving (or at least stabilizing) these disputes will remove the primary rationale for military competition - if Serbia no longer perceives a threat in Kosovo's existence and if Bosnians all feel secure in the state, the incentive to arm aggressively diminishes significantly.

Finally, the policy recommendations call for a more coordinated and constructive role by external powers. Rather than treating the Balkans as a chessboard for rivalry, the great powers should be encouraged to support the above regional initiatives. The thesis suggests convening a format akin to the "Berlin Process" but for security, where the EU, US, Russia, China, Turkey, and perhaps NATO as an institution come together with Balkan states to endorse arms control and non-interference pledges. This could be enormously complex, but even incremental steps matter - for instance, an agreement among the big powers to limit military aid to the region only for defensive, peacekeeping purposes, and to increase transparency of their own activities. If Russia and the West could agree (even informally) to avoid fueling certain arms races - such as not introducing new categories of heavy offensive weapons - it would help stabilize perceptions. Similarly, NATO could deepen partnership programs with Serbia

(short of membership) to build trust, while Russia could be invited to observe regional exercises or participate in joint disaster-response drills, reducing its fear of NATO encirclement. The role of organisations like the OSCE is critical as a neutral platform where East and West meet; reactivating OSCE's arms control and confidence-building missions in the former Yugoslavia is a plausible step. The thesis also points out that external actors can contribute resources: for example, funding verification technology for the arms control regime, or supporting economic development as a peace dividend for countries that reduce military spending. In essence, managing foreign influence is as important as local measures - the Western Balkans need the great powers to act as stakeholders in peace rather than rival sponsors, and diplomatic efforts should aim to align international incentives accordingly.

Taken together, these recommendations form a comprehensive strategy to halt the trajectory of the arms race and replace it with a cooperative security environment. They are ambitious and would require strong political will from local leaders and sustained engagement from the international community. However, the thesis argues that the alternatives - continuing the current path - could lead the region into a dangerous future. Implementing even some of these measures would begin to diminish mistrust. For instance, if neighbors regularly share military information and convene to address threats (like natural disasters or terrorism) jointly, they build habits of cooperation. Over time, this could transform the security dilemma into a security partnership, where states feel secure with each other rather than against each other. Conclusion: The resurgence of militarization in the Western Balkans post-2014 illustrates how quickly peace gains can be reversed in a fragile region when underlying issues are left to fester. This thesis, through a neorealist analysis, has shown that in the absence of a robust regional security framework, states have defaulted to self-help - arming themselves to counter perceived threats. Internal insecurities (ethnic disputes, secessionist pressures) and external geopolitical rivalries (NATO vs Russia, new China interests) created a perfect storm that revived an arms race many hoped was relegated to the 1990s. The central finding is sobering: the post-2014 arms race has increased the risk of misunderstanding and conflict, even if none of the regional actors outwardly seek war. Yet, there is nothing inevitable about this outcome. The thesis concludes on a cautiously optimistic note - recognizing that the Western Balkans, with support, can choose a different path. By addressing the root causes of fear through cooperation, transparency, and renewed commitment to mutual security, the region can escape the vicious circle of the security dilemma. The policy recommendations offered serve as a roadmap towards that goal, aiming to ensure that the Western Balkans' future is defined by

stability, integration, and development rather than by arms competition. In contributing these insights, the thesis adds to the academic and policy discourse on post-conflict security, demonstrating the importance of both theoretical frameworks (like neorealism's focus on structure) and pragmatic solutions in understanding and ultimately resolving the challenges of regional militarization. The hope is that these findings will inform policymakers and international partners as they work to prevent a new crisis in a region that has endured enough instability, and to secure a lasting peace in the Western Balkans.