

KOSOVO, THE “FOUR-PILLAR” STRATEGY OF SERBIA AND THE ANTAGONISM BE- TWEEN THE “WEST” AND “MORE-THAN-THE-REST”

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The present article focuses on the opposing efforts for influence on Serbia, between the “West” and its rivals. The main argument of the article is built on the assumption that the world is no more divided between the “West” and the “rest” but between the “West” and a dynamic, emerging bloc of states, which in spite of not having yet the coherency of the “West” constitutes more than the rest. On the basis of this global transformation, the manipulation of the issue of Kosovo in order for pressure to be exercised on Serbia and the four-pillar strategy of the latter are examined.

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On 7 May 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Belgrade at the invitation of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.¹ The statements included references to the traditional, warm relations between the two states, the comprehensive strategic partnership signed in 2016 and the Belt and Road cooperation. This marked a pivotal moment in the struggle for influence and control between the West and Russia-China, centered around Serbia, which remains one of the few Western Balkan states not to have joined NATO. Serbia's non-accession to NATO has made it a significant issue in the context of the global, modular war continuing on major fronts, including Ukraine and West Asia.²

In this article the emphasis is on examining the exercise of influence or even coercion on Serbia, given on the one hand the changing global balance of power, and on the other hand the unresolved issue of Kosovo. The above two conditions combine a mixture of “soft” and “hard” power influence over Serbia in terms of its foreign but also domestic policy.³

The primary prerequisite, however, in order to comprehend the situation around Serbia is that the world is no more consists of the “West and the rest”; it may not be the case yet that against the “West” there is a complete and equally consistent bloc of states but at least it is “more- than-the-rest” that opposes the “West”.

The “West” and the “More-than-the-Rest”

Here, we use the term “West” for schematic reasons. The concept of the “West” remains largely abstract in principle, but we concretize it based on what is at stake in each historical conjuncture.⁴ The “Cold War” provided a solid dimension to the concept of the “West”: the capitalist world led by the US. While more or less, the concept of “West” is still dominated by the Cold War approach especially regarding U.S. domination, the end of the “Cold War” gave rise to doubt as to the preservation of this concept.⁵

The concept of the “West” has survived as an international space led by the U.S., its interests and policies. In the present it is mainly motivated by its competition

1) Xi Jinping Arrives in Belgrade for a State Visit to Serbia, http://th.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202405/t20240510_11302343.htm

2) Θ. Τζ?μας, *Greece and Cyprus in the Post- American World* (May, 2022), Topos Publisher: Topos Publications, Athens, Greece, ISBN139789604994120).

3) S. B. Rothman, “Revising the Soft Power Concept: What are the Means and Mechanisms of Soft Power?” *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011), 49–64; Alexander Vuving, “How Soft Power Works,” (1 September 2009). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1466220>

4) Shahrough Akhavi, “Islam and the West in World History,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (June 2003), p. 545–562; Samuel P. Huntington, “The West Unique, Not Universal,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (Nov.–December 1996), p. 28–46.

5) Owen Harries, “The Collapse of ‘The West’,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (Sep.–October 1993), p. 41–53.

with China and – in reality the "modular" world war – with Russia and China at the front.⁶ This latter situation par excellence "revitalizes" the concept of the "West".⁷

The U.S.-led part of the world, the "West" possesses a huge range of "tools", such as NATO, the EU, the military bases of the USA itself in dozens of states around the world, the dollar and the euro, domination on the most important international economic organizations, the importance of the "West" in the banking and financial circuit, cultural influence on sports and entertainment and the hegemony of Western universities in global education among others.⁸

In terms of "hard power" and military coordination, the main framework consists of NATO, AUKUS, and several multilateral agreements regarding military cooperation.⁹ In this framework, the U.S.-Saudi economic and military relationship as well as the failed until now attempt for the so-called "Arab NATO" are also successful and failed respectively, parts of the complex and multi-layered military alliances in the U.S.-led world.¹⁰

On the other hand, the alliance between Russia and China has neither the same past nor the same depth. Still, it is undergoing a phase of impressively accelerated and intensifying evolution, especially after the start of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and the reaction of the "West" to it.¹¹

China and Russia have not yet formed a correspondingly deep and stable common framework for exercising sovereignty, or a perfectly symmetrical antipode to the "West". While the Russian-Chinese alliance was initiated in the 90's, its trajectory was not until recently as stable, coherent and straightforward as the US-led bloc of the "West", ranging from the initial approach of the 90s under the weight of common bitterness and humiliation from US policy to Russia's turn to the West in the 2000s and the intense revival after 2007, especially after 2014 and the events in Ukraine.¹²

Still, synergies between the two states, interdependencies, and cooperation towards forming a coalition of states that are alternative to the US-led world are intensifying.

6) T. Tzimas, *Greece and Hellenism in the Post-American Era, After Ukraine, What?* (Topos Publications, 2022), ISBN: 978-960-499-412-0.

7) Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

8) Report on how the "West" marks its global hegemony.

9) BBC "Aukus: UK, US and Australia launch pact to counter China," BBC News, 16 September 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58564837>

10) Dr. Florence Gaub, *An Arab NATO in the Making? Middle Eastern Military Cooperation Since 2011* (US Army War College Press, 2016).

11) Richard Sakwa, "East Vs. West: A New Cold War?" *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p.

12-20; Ziya Öniş, "The West Versus The Rest: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and the Crisis Of the "Post-Western" Order," *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p. 33-52.

12) A. Lukin, "The Russia-China Entente and its Future," *Int Polit.* Vol. 58 (2021), p. 363-380, p. 363-364. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00251-7>

Since 2009 China has maintained the position of Russia’s main trading partner among individual countries, although not without problems.¹³ Moreover, their military cooperation has deepened, with Russia supporting China's more sophisticated armaments, while at the same time both countries (though not only them) are leading the way in strengthening the role of the BRICS.¹⁴ The two countries and several others pioneer a "more just, polycentric world order" versus the "collective West".¹⁵ The ongoing "rounds of sanctions" against Russia by the U.S. and the EU have made China an even more indispensable partner of Russia in relation to financial circumvention of sanctions.¹⁶

Thus, the debate on influence in Serbia is articulated between two blocs of powers that may not be symmetrical yet but certainly cannot be defined as “the West and the rest”. As time goes by, the gradual decline of West's power proves inversely proportional to that of the emerging power bloc, which has China and Russia at its center. It is within this emerging dipole that Serbia is moving.

Kosovo as a Point of Reference for Pressure and Influence

In recent history of Serbia, two interconnected events dominate: the dissolution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The second is the war with NATO and, eventually the de facto secession of Kosovo. The second event is a continuation of the first.

We will not go into detail here about the historical facts about Kosovo. We will only highlight the sequence between the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the conflict in Kosovo, NATO intervention and the de facto secession of Kosovo.¹⁷ While UN SC Resolution 1244 of 1999 reaffirmed the unity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it removed all practical and effective control of the federal government, over Kosovo, in favor of a peacekeeping force, which was a state-building force.¹⁸ The whole

13) Gleb Stolyarov, “As trade with China booms, some Russian companies are flourishing,” 13 March 2024. <https://reuters.com/business/trade-with-china-booms-some-russian-companies-are-flourishing-2024-03-13/>

14) D. Stefanovich, “Russia to help China develop an early warning system,” *The Diplomat*, 25 October 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/russia-to-help-china-develop-an-early-warning-system/>; V. Kashin, “Tacit alliance: Russia and China take military partnership to new level,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 22 October 2019. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80136>; Hüseyin Korkmaz, “BRICS and the New Cold War: Towards a Multipolar World Order?” *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p. 147-152

15) Karl Sanchez, “BRICS+ Nizhny Novgorod Day Two: Remarks and Presser, karlofl’s Geopolitical Gymnasium,” 11 June 2024. <https://karlofl.substack.com/p/brics-nizhny-novgorod-day-two-remarks>

16) Ralph Jennings, “China, Russia could bypass barriers to buoy business as Western sanctions bite, researchers say,” *South China Morning Post*, 13 May 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3262503/china-russia-could-bypass-barriers-buoy-business-western-sanctions-bite-researchers-say>

17) British Kosovo conflict Balkan history [1998–1999], <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kosovo-conflict>; Paul Latawski and Martin A. Smith, *The Kosovo crisis and the evolution of post-Cold War European Security* (Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 6-14; A. Cassese, “Ex Iniuria Ius Oritur: Are We Moving Towards International Legitimation of Forcible Humanitarian Countermeasures in the World Community?” *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 10 (1999), p. 23, 24.

18) UN SC 1244 (1999).

procedure that was followed led to the creation of conditions susceptible to de facto independence.¹⁹ Kosovo authorities declared their independence in 2008.²⁰

The fact that the U.S., the UK, the entire G7, and much of the EU have recognized Kosovo's independence has formed a condition of obvious mistrust – to say the least – and distance between Serbia and the "West".²¹

At the same time, however, Kosovo's de facto secession and its stable relationship to the extent of dependence on the US turns it into a constant focus of US hard power pressure – and hence influence – on Serbia.²² In recent years, relations between the Kosovo authorities and the Serbs still living in Kosovo's north have remained particularly tense. The latest episode which showed how close we are to a new war in Kosovo only broke out in September 2023 and tensions have continued ever since.²³

U.S. interference was required to reduce tensions temporarily but not to resolve them. The events of 2023, especially as a continuation of the previous ones have been of decisive importance as they have shown not only that Kosovo relies on NATO but also that NATO through the issue of Kosovo can exercise constant pressure on Serbia whenever it becomes a nuisance – at least beyond an acceptable degree – for the US.

Kosovo is seeking NATO membership by invoking its protection vis-à-vis Serbia and the latter's relationship with Russia. In this sense, NATO's presence in Kosovo constitutes a constant "Western" and basically American hard-power influence on Serbia, or else a form of coercion.²⁴ Besides, one should not forget that especially after the "Prespa Agreement" between Greece and North Macedonia, the latter joined NATO, resulting in an almost complete encirclement of Serbia and its severance from any direct contact with Russia.

19) Themistoklis Tzimas, *The Russian Special Military Operation in Ukraine from the Perspective of Jus ad Bellum* (Cambridge Scholars, 2024); Letter from Ban Ki-moon, Sec'y Gen., United Nations, to the President, United Nations Sec. Council, U.N. Doc. S/20071168, 26 March 2007; The Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Kosovo, Report of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Kosovo's Future Status, Delivered to the Security Council, U.N. Doc. S/2007/168, 26 March 2007.

20) ICJ, Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo, 22 July 2010, at p. 403, In paras. 56, 79, 83; M. Milanovic, "Arguing the Kosovo Case," in *The Law and Politics of the Kosovo Advisory Opinion*, M. Milanovic and M. Wood (eds) (Oxford University Press, 2014), at p. 26; T. Burri, "The Kosovo Opinion and Secession: The Sounds of Silence and Missing Links," *German Law Journal*, Vol. 10 (2011), at p. 886.

21) Milana Zivanovic, "Memory vs Oblivion: On the 25th Anniversary of the NATO Aggression Against Yugoslavia," Valdai Discussion Club, 22 March 2024. <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/memory-vs-oblivion-on-the-25th-anniversary/>; Andi Hoxhaj OBE, "Ukraine war: Serbia is shifting closer to Russia – here's why," *The Conversation*, 7 November 2022. <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-serbia-is-shifting-closer-to-russia-heres-why-192472>

22) Joyce P. Kaufman, "Chapter 6 - The Post-Cold War Period," in *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), p. 181.

23) Dimitar Bechev, Analysis: "Are Kosovo and Serbia on the brink of war?" 3 October 2023, Al Jazeera English, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/10/3/are-kosovo-and-serbia-on-the-brink-of-war>

24) Kimberley Kruijver and Visar Xhambazi, "Kosovo's NATO future- How to Square the Circle?, Clingendael," Netherlands Institute for International Relations, (December 2020). https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Kosovos_NATO_future_Correct.pdf; Giorgos Triantafyllou, "KFOR and Provision of Security in Northern Kosovo: Tracing the sources of protracted insecurity," ELIAMEP, Working Paper No. 48/2014, (May 2014); Gordon N. Bardos, "Containing Kosovo," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2005), p. 17-43.

The attitude of Russia and China towards Kosovo is obviously different from that of the USA. It should be noted here that during NATO's intervention, Russia and China expressed their opposition as they do today, considering this intervention contrary to international law, while they have also not recognized Kosovo's independence. However, Russia and China lacked at the time the military power and willingness to engage with the "West" to support Serbian strategy on the issue.²⁵

Since then and especially because of the global transformation, upgrading the “rest” to at least “more-than-the-rest,” the relationship with Serbia is strengthened. Serbia has purchased weapons’ systems from China while since 2009 the two states have signed a Strategic Agreement.²⁶ The military cooperation between Serbia and China has grown stronger. The two states held a common military exercise – the first one of China on European territory- while China has become Serbia’s leading military partner. Moreover, China has supplied Serbia with equipment, including the Chinese FK-3 medium-range anti-aircraft missile system and the Chinese CH-95 and CH-92A UAVs.²⁷

Traditional relations with China have improved impressively at all levels, with infrastructure investment obviously being the most important. It is no coincidence that during President Xi's recent meeting with his Serbian counterpart, the two countries agreed to build a "shared future". As President Xi stated ““Eight years ago, Serbia became China’s first comprehensive strategic partner in the Central and Eastern European region, and today Serbia is the first European country to build a community of destiny with China, fully reflecting the strategic, special and high level of China-Serbia relations,” whereas president Vucic declared that “the two countries “are moving from strategic relations, through which we had managed to raise our bilateral ties, to the joint future of our two countries... That is the highest possible form of cooperation between two countries, and I am proud that I was able to sign this today as the president of Serbia”.”²⁸

As far as Russia is concerned, military relations with Russia have been boosted again after 2022. A series of Russian and other analyses suggest that after Transnistria, the Western Balkans region will be the next front in the confrontation between the "West"

25) J. Hughes, “Russia and the Secession of Kosovo: Power, Norms and the Failure of Multilateralism,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 65, No. 5 (2013), p. 992–1016; Barry R. Posen, “The War for Kosovo: Serbia’s Political-Military Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2000), p. 39–84.

26) Janusz Bugajski, “Serbia Bolsters Connections With Russia and China,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 21(73) (2024). <https://jamestown.org/program/serbia-intensifies-connections-with-russia-and-china/>; Nina Miholjic-Ivkovic, “Security Aspect in China-Serbia Relations: Digital and Military Cooperation,” *The Geopolitics*, 19 April 2024. <https://thegeopolitics.com/security-aspect-in-china-serbia-relations-digital-and-military-cooperation/>

27) Hu Yuwei and Fan Wei, “Exclusive: China-Serbia military cooperation supports Serbia’s defense modernization, empowers defense capabilities: Serbian Defense Minister,” *Global Times*, 22 October 2023. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202310/1300333.shtml>

28) Dusan Stojanovic and Jovana Gec, “China and EU-candidate Serbia Sign Agreement to Build a ‘Shared Future’,” *The Diplomat*, 9 May 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/china-and-eu-candidate-serbia-sign-agreement-to-build-a-shared-future/>

and Russia.²⁹ In 2021–2022, Russia ranked third after China and Belarus regarding arms' deliveries to Serbia.³⁰ In addition, in April 2013, Tomislav Nikolic- then President of Serbia- signed a Declaration on Strategic Partnership with Russia.³¹ In implementing this agreement, several protocols have been signed, including the procurement of military drones.

Between NATO's presence in Kosovo on the one hand and Serbia's cooperation with Russia and China – in general and at the military level in particular – on the other hand, there is a fundamental asymmetry however: NATO's presence is entrenched in the region. In conditions of crisis or much more war, NATO has the ability to reinforce Kosovo's forces continuously. Russia and China, on the other hand, cannot offer Serbia assistance practically in the present and near future. To do so, NATO members would have to grant them permission, which is unlikely, or NATO will not exist in the region, which does not seem immediate. They can, of course, arm Serbia to a certain extent in the present or even find collateral ways of reinforcement, but they will prove extremely difficult and not equivalent to those on the NATO side. Serbia needs to balance between its tendency to align closer with Russian and China on the one hand and the potential coercion on the ground by NATO forces in Kosovo.

Conclusions: The Four-Pillar Strategy and Its Future

Serbia's strategy as a non- aligned nation is based on the "Four Pillars of Foreign Policy": the EU, Russia, China, and the U.S. constitute the four pillars. "The EU was and is by far the most influential partner in terms of trade and investments... Russia is the primary gas, oil, and fertilizer source and a key ally of Serbia in the UNSC... China is important for its strategic investments in a few companies and investments in key infrastructure projects. The US has the lowest level of trade with Serbia, compared to the other three, however, it is an important investor, particularly in the IT sector."³² More than these however, the four pillars which are gradually becoming two, represent on the one side the "West," which is more powerful on the field in the present and the "more-than-the-rest," which are advancing globally, are friendlier to Serbia but are less powerful in the Balkans.

29) M. Cruz, "Russia in the Western Balkans: Interests and Tools of Influence," In: Mölder, H., Sazonov, V., Chochia, A., Kerikmäe, T. (eds) *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare. Contributions to International Relations* (Springer, Cham. 2021), at p. 315-333.

30) SIPRI Arms Transfers Database // SIPRI. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

31) Lulzim Peci and Bekim Sejdiu, "Western Disunity Has Enabled Russia to Disrupt Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue," *Balkan Insight*, 4 June 2024. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/06/04/western-disunity-has-enabled-russia-to-disrupt-kosovo-serbia-dialogue/>

32) Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes and Sladan Rankic, "Serbian Foreign Policy in the Wake of the War in Ukraine," *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, 29 July 2022. <https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/serbian-foreign-policy-in-the-wake-of-the-war-in-ukraine>

Serbia's strategy was based on several delicate balances, which no longer exist beyond any doubt, after the Russian "Special Military Operation". Although Serbia condemned the Russian operation, it refrained from imposing sanctions.

The balance between the four pillars was fragile from the start. The prospect of Serbia's EU membership has been a strong positive incentive for Serbia's further rapprochement with the "West". As the "soft power" bearer par excellence of the "West", the EU would offer Serbia an outlet for economic development, political normality, and normalization of relations around Kosovo. These ambitions have not been confirmed. The weakness of the project of "Europeanization" in general,³³ the EU's stance of making demands for resolving bilateral conflicts that are almost impossible to achieve at this stage,³⁴ the relative ambiguity as to what Serbia is being asked about Kosovo to join and, of course, events in Ukraine as part of a world war have significantly delayed Serbia's accession path and therefore limited the projection of "soft power" on the part of the "West". A main problem is that EU foreign affairs ministers agreed to amend Chapter 35, which constitutes a key part of the negotiation's portfolio potentially freezing Serbia's accession process in case it does not normalize its relationship with Kosovo and does not stop "obstructing Kosovo's efforts to join key international organizations, such as the UN, the Council of Europe and NATO".³⁵

At the same time, we must not forget that a part of Serbia's opposition mobilized against the current president in anticipation of support from abroad and especially from the "West", a condition that further strained relations with the EU and the US, giving rise to the fear of an orange revolution. It is precisely these situations that illustrate how complex relations and attempts to exert influence over Serbia are between West and More-than-the-rest. The EU dominates as a trading partner. It has given Serbia a perspective but at the same time demands a great deal from it. NATO has fought against Serbia, surrounded it, actively supported Kosovo's security and, at the same time, constantly reminded Serbia of the slim scope for action against an area that is still considered part of Serbia under UN Security Council resolutions.

On the other hand, relations with China and Russia are traditional – as far as Russia is concerned and has great cultural depth – but are also rapidly developing militarily and economically, especially with China.³⁶ They are also firm in their support for

33) Stahl B., "Another "Strategic Accession"? The EU and Serbia (2000–2010)," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2013), p. 447–468. doi:10.1080/00905992.2012.743517

34) M. Petrovic and G. Wilson, "Bilateral relations in the Western Balkans as a challenge for EU accession," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2021), p. 201–218.

35) Euronews, 'Serbia needs to align further with the EU', Commissioner Várhelyi tells Vucic in Belgrade, 15 May 2024. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/14/is-serbia-sliding-towards-authoritarianism-or-closer-to-eu-membership>

36) Miša Stojadinovic and Violeta Raškovic Talovic, "Serbia And China: The Geopolitical And Economic Importance Of Mutual Cooperation For Serbia," China- CEE Institute, Working Paper, 39, 22 November 2018. <https://china-cee.eu/>

the Serbian positions on Kosovo. Apart from the problems in these relations as well, the major issue is that in the main field of projection of "hard power" in relation to Serbia, which is Kosovo, the possibility of intervention by Russia and China remains limited precisely because of NATO's presence in the region. Thus, a first asymmetry is identified geographically: Serbia on the Kosovo issue is logical to lean towards Russia and China, but in the event of a new war over Kosovo, the latter will not be able to help Serbia today in a way that balances NATO.

The second asymmetry added to the first has to do with the change in the planetary power correlation and the tensions it causes. The ongoing war in Ukraine, Palestine, the economic power of coalitions such as BRICS+, the strong position of China, Russia and other non-Western states mean that the comparison and conflict both in general and around Serbia in particular is not between "West and the rest" but between "West and more-than-the-rest". Or, if we wanted to avoid the pun, we would talk about "West" and the opposing coalition that is being formed, which proclaims not just a "polycentric world" but a "harmonious world".

The above approach is crucial for Serbia's "four pillar strategy". The very fact that we are not in a context of hegemony of the "West" but of the formation of opposing and confrontational blocs, with the "Western" descending and the "more-than-the-rest" rising, shows that Serbia's strategy of not committing to one of the two blocs is correct. At the same time, however, it is becoming less and less feasible, since the dynamics of the "modular world war" that is gradually being waged forces all states to choose sides. From this perspective, the fact that the "West", and in particular the US and NATO, can project more directly, greater, and more threatening "hard power" against Serbia through Kosovo, makes it more attractive for Serbia to turn away from the West, especially if combined with the delays in EU accession negotiations, precisely because the "West" appears more as a patron and even a threat than as a partner. Therefore, we will see Serbia trying to keep a delicate balance while leaning firmly towards the "more-than-the-rest" pioneers of the doctrine of the "harmonic world".