



Study Guide

for

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

**Topic Area: Strengthening NATO's Open Door Policy and Strategic Engagement in the
Western Balkans**

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1. Welcoming Letter

Esteemed Delegates,

It is our pleasure to welcome you to the 16th Edition of Rhodes Model Regional Cooperation and to the North Atlantic Council. We are honored to chair this committee and are looking forward to guiding discussions on Euro-Atlantic security and defense cooperation.

As delegates of the NAC, you will address NATO's Open Door Policy in the Western Balkans, balancing Alliance cohesion with strategic consolidation in a region shaped by geopolitical competition.

This study guide provides key historical context, an assessment of NATO accession prospects for Western Balkan states, and an overview of external challenges affecting the Alliance's policy in the region. It is intended as a foundation for your preparation, and you are expected to conduct further independent research and review the NAC's mandate and Rules of Procedure.

We look forward to engaging debate, meaningful discussion, and a rewarding conference experience.

Best Regards and a Warm Welcome,

Maria Pandria, NATO Secretary General

Apostolos Refanidis, NATO Deputy Secretary General

2. Introduction to the Committee

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), constitutes a product of the post- World War II climate of political instability, financial incapacity and an alerting security deficit evident in each individual state of the European Continent and the North Atlantic area at large. Thus, in the pursuit of overcoming national shortcomings by establishing a collective security and strategic solidarity mechanism, NATO - thereafter referred to as the “Alliance” - was founded in the year 1949 in Washington. As of today, the 32 NATO Members - thereafter referred to as “Allies” - have developed a collective military structure and defense mechanism, able to coordinate and execute political, strategic and operational functions with the aim of safeguarding the Allies’ strategic interests against common threats and challenges¹.

The Washington Treaty’s provisions for collective defense among Allies, obtain their legitimacy from Article 51 of the UN Charter which establishes “...the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations”². Specifically, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty describes the Allies’ steadfast commitment to collectively defend the territorial sovereignty of an Ally, in case of an armed attack, within the geographical limits of the North Atlantic region. In the process of safeguarding Allied peace and security, the Washington Treaty provides that conflict resolution shall prioritize peaceful nonmilitary means and only resort to military alternatives when necessary for upholding the Alliance’s purposes. The strategic direction and threat perception of the Alliance evolves and changes in accordance with emerging challenges and geopolitical developments³.

Currently, all Allied activities are designed with the purpose of adhering to the Alliance’s three core tasks:

1. Deterrence and Defence

¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “A short history of NATO”, NATO History, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/nato-history/a-short-history-of-nato>

² “United Nations Charter”, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>

³ “The North Atlantic Treaty”, NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm

Deterrence constitutes NATO's effort to prevent an attack from occurring, by showcasing credible military strength and readiness. Defence encompasses the protection of Allied territory that has already undergone an external attack, through collective military action and preparedness against conventional, as well as evolving threats. In order to achieve both goals, Allies pool their tangible and non-tangible military resources to execute collective operations, a process which requires a common decision-making system and collective military command centers⁴.

2. Crisis Prevention and Management

The preemptive nature of Crisis Prevention requires long-term preparedness and resilience, which would ensure that the Allies can mitigate any emerging crises or areas of instability effectively and timely, before they escalate to large-scale disruption of peace and security. In addition, the corrective nature of crisis management provides that in case a large-scale geopolitical crisis erupts, NATO possesses all necessary tools and mechanisms to reduce the negative impact of the crisis on Allied security⁵.

3. Cooperative Security

Cooperative Security refers to the intended collaboration between the Alliance and non-member nations in order to enhance collective defence, crisis management, conflict prevention and stability⁶.

Lastly, NATO's operations take place in the following 5 operational domains: Land, Air, Sea, Cyberspace and Space. Most Allied activities, however, require interoperability between multiple domains for a singular task⁷.

The North Atlantic Council (NAC) constitutes the principal political and decision-making body within NATO. It constitutes the forum where representatives of all Allies discuss, consult, and take decisions on issues affecting the security and defense of the Alliance. The NAC convenes at three main levels: the Permanent Representatives (Ambassadors), who meet at least once

⁴ "Deterrence and defence", NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_133127.htm

⁵ "Crisis management", NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49192.htm

⁶ "Partnerships and Cooperative Security", NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_79430.htm

⁷ "Multi-Domain Operations in NATO – Explained", NATO's *Strategic Warfare Development Command*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.act.nato.int/article/mdo-in-nato-explained/>

a week; the Ministers of Foreign Affairs or Defense, who usually meet two to three times a year; and the Heads of State and Government, who meet at Summits, typically on an annual or biannual basis⁸. The NAC may consult upon items that cover all of NATO's military and strategic activities. NAC decisions are reached on the basis of consensus and common accord, omitting any elements of majority-based decision-making. Thus, NAC policies constitute the expression of the collective will of all the sovereign Allies. In RhodesMRC 2026, NAC delegates will meet at the ministerial level, specifically as the Ministers of Foreign Affairs for their respective countries⁹.

3. Introduction to the Topic Area

The so-far procession of NATO's "Open Door Policy"

As mentioned before, NATO was created in 1949 after the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty. The reason for its creation was the need for an institution that would safeguard security between the Western European powers that had been ravaged by the Second World War, while also deterring and countering the Soviet Union and its satellites in the East.¹⁰ According to Article 10 of the Treaty, "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty". It is important to note the word "invite" in the wording of the article, as it gives us insight on how the accession process developed over the lifetime of the Alliance. Before the fall of the Eastern Bloc, NATO enlargements only happened with the Alliance taking initiative first. During the 1952 expansion, Greece and Türkiye were invited to join by the Alliance itself. The same is true for West Germany and Spain in 1955 and 1982 respectively.

In 1989, the Communist World experienced a series of liberal revolutions which resulted in its eventual destruction, thus putting an end to the Cold War. This event gave birth to multiple democratic states in Eastern Europe, and forced NATO to adapt its accession policy to the

⁸ "North Atlantic Council (NAC)", NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49763.htm

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Haglund, David G, "NATO | Founders, Members, & History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/North-Atlantic-Treaty-Organization>.

new circumstances. More specifically, the term “Open Door” was first mentioned by NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner in March 1992, while visiting Warsaw, where he declared that “The doors to NATO are open”. This statement was followed by the publication of the “NATO Study on Enlargement” in 1995 and the subsequent launch of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 1999.¹¹ Today, any eligible European Democracy that wants to become part of the Alliance can do so by sending a letter of intention to the Alliance and enter into a MAP with the prospect of becoming a member-state.

Historical Background

The Western Balkans have been a constant source of geopolitical turmoil since the time of Otto Von Bismarck. The diverse racial and religious make-up of the region, historical disputes among nations, as well as the absence of stable political systems are all factors to the persisting instability. After the end of the Yugoslav Wars, tensions were at an all time high, and with no hope of normalizing relations by themselves, Balkan states turned their eyes to NATO. For countries in the region, NATO membership means entrance to an international mechanism that can guarantee them security from external threats while also safeguarding internal stability and rule of law. NATO’s expansion to the Balkans has moved eastward in waves, often following significant domestic reforms. At the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Allied Leaders invited Albania and Croatia to start accession talks which resulted in the entrance of Albania and Croatia to the Alliance a year later. This was followed by the accession of Montenegro in June 2017 and finally the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia in March 2020.¹²

Recent Developments

The sense of security that NATO membership offered to countries in the Western Balkans has, for the most part, been washed away by recalibration of American Foreign Policy to serve the “America First” agenda. The catalyst for this was the Munich Security Conference of 2025, where the reliability of Article 5 came under question for the first time. Following the

¹¹ “Enlargement and Article 10”, NATO, Accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/enlargement-and-article-10>

¹² “Enlargement and Article 10”, NATO, Accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/enlargement-and-article-10>

conference, Balkan states began to re-consider basing their security strategy around the assumption that NATO will remain stable and committed to the needs of its members.¹³

In March 2025, Croatia, Albania and Kosovo signed a Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation in Tirana which, among other things, aimed to promote defense capabilities, counter hybrid threats and support Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic prospects.¹⁴ In response to the signing of this Tripartite Pact, which Serbian Minister of Defense Bratislav Gašić stated is a "provocative move that undermines efforts to strengthen regional security,"¹⁵ Serbia and Hungary moved to sign their own Strategic Defense Cooperation Agreement in April of the same year in Belgrade. The agreement emphasised the importance of military-to-military cooperation, reflected in bilateral and multinational exercises, and military-technical cooperation in the areas of procurement of systems and weaponry.¹⁶



¹³ "The Protracted Path of the Western Balkans Toward NATO Integration," n.d.

<https://trendsresearch.org/insight/the-protracted-path-of-the-western-balkans-toward-nato-integration/>.

¹⁴ Sejđini, Muçi, and Super User, "Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo Sign Joint Declaration on Defense Cooperation," n.d. <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/newsroom/1805-albania-croatia-and-kosovo-sign-joint-declaration-on-defense-cooperation>.

¹⁵ Adel, Ahmed, "Serbia-Hungary Signs Military Agreement in Response to Croatia's Tripartite Pact - Global Research," Global Research, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/serbia-hungary-signs-military-agreement/5883400>.

¹⁶ "Agreement Signed With Hungary in Field of Defence," n.d. <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/246190/agreement-signed-with-hungary-in-field-of-defence.php>.

¹⁷ Kruijver, Kimberly, "Kosovo's NATO Future", December 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346964713_Kosovo%27s_NATO_Future_How_to_Square_the_Circle

4. Key-Words and Definitions

Western Balkans

The Western Balkans is a designation for a region which includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo. All Western Balkan states except for Albania were formerly part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which dissolved in 1991. Following this disintegration, years of armed conflict and political violence led to a long-term process of post-conflict statebuilding that lasts until today. Although political stability has resumed in the majority of Western Balkan states, a few remain internally challenged by ethnic religious and linguistic differences¹⁸.

Yugoslavia

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia constitutes a former federal country situated in the central-western part of the Balkan Peninsula. Yugoslavia was an official state from 1929-2003, was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War and remained characteristically governed by Tito's Communist Party of Yugoslavia. The Republic gradually resolved when, through a series of violent uprising, most individual federal states decided to diverge from the Yugoslav-socialist system, declare independence and later seek integration into Euro-Atlantic structures¹⁹.

Post-Conflict State

The term "Post-Conflict State" refers to state whose societal order, political system and infrastructure have been simultaneously and irrevocably affected by a state of war - internal or external -, in a way that requires major sustained reconstruction, in order for the state to return to the condition of a secure, functioning and legitimate state entity. This stabilization process initially requires the cessation of hostilities, and secondly comprises aspects of

¹⁸ "The Western Balkans region", GRID Arendal, 2015, <https://www.grida.no/resources/7078>

¹⁹ "Yugoslavia", Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Yugoslavia-former-federated-nation-1929-2003>

Economic and Social Reconstruction, as well as - most crucially for NATO - Political and Security Reconstruction²⁰.

Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)

A Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) is an international agreement between a State or International Organization - such as NATO - which provides military and other forces and a State which has consented to receive those forces. It outlines the obligations of the foreign forces in the receiving country, as well as the immunities and privileges these forces are to enjoy, with regard to the receiving State's national legislation²¹.

Kosovo Force (KFOR)

KFOR, a NATO peacekeeping mission consisting of approximately 5,200 troops provided by 33 Allied and partner countries. It was mandated by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and the Military-Technical Agreement between NATO, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia. KFOR's original objectives were to establish a secure environment and demilitarize the Kosovo Liberation Army while also supporting the international humanitarian effort and coordinating with the international civil presence. Today, the NATO-led KFOR mission continues to contribute to maintaining a safe and secure environment for all people and communities living in Kosovo and freedom of movement.²²

Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a massive international infrastructure and economic development program that China initiated in 2013 with the aim to connect Asia's economy to Europe's through land routes, unofficially known as "the 21st century's Silk Road". Since then, the BRI has grown into a global effort to increase the interconnectedness of Afro-Eurasia through infrastructure and trade. Opponents of the BRI have often accused the Chinese

²⁰ "Defining Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Rehabilitation for Sustainable Peace", Pol.Sci Institute, <https://polsci.institute/conflict-resolution-peace-building/post-conflict-reconstruction-sustainable-peace/>

²¹ "Partnership for Peace Status of Forces Agreement", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-for-peace-status-of-forces-agreement>

²² "NATO's Role in Kosovo," NATO, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/natos-role-in-kosovo>.

Government of leveraging the Initiative in order to expand their influence within states that enter it, with the Western Balkans being no exception.²³

5. Legal Framework

The Washington Treaty

Article 5 and Article 6

The Alliance's purpose of maintaining peace in the North Atlantic Region through the process of collective decision making, with regard to armed threats disrupting Allied security, is enshrined in Articles 5 and 6 of NATO's Founding Treaty.

Article 5 highlights the obligation of the Alliance to assist any member state under attack in any way the Alliance deems necessary, be that in a military manner or otherwise. Thus, while assistance is obligatory, Article 5 provides flexibility with regard to the scale, form and scope of the assisting operations²⁴. Moreover, Article 5 covers potential armed attacks on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when these are stationed or moving within the seas, air and land of the above mentioned territory, defined as the "North Atlantic"²⁵. Article 6 on the other hand establishes the territorial limitations within which the Allied obligation for Collective Defense may or shall be applied. Most specifically, it serves to define an "armed attack" eligible for a collective response as one occurring within the territory of any European or North American Ally, or other territories within the official political jurisdiction of an Ally.

Article 10

Article 10, upon which the Open Door Policy is based, creates the outline for the official accession process that countries seeking NATO membership are required to follow. Most specifically, after the Allies decide to invite a state that has successfully completed its

²³ "What Is China's Belt and Road Initiative? – Michigan Journal of Economics", <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2023/10/23/what-is-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ "The North Atlantic Treaty - Article 6", NATO, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm

Membership Action Plan to the Alliance, the official accession procedure is the following²⁶: Initially, a team of NATO Experts engages in official Accession Talks with the invitee in question, discussing political, military and defense matters, as well as more technical aspects of an equitable NATO accession, such as the invitee's resource contribution capabilities. Secondly, and if the first step is successful, the invitee accepts the legal obligations Treaty of a NATO Ally and commits to an individual reform timetable, outlining all necessary changes that the invitee commits to complete before the official accession. To continue, the Allies sign and ratify the Accession Protocols for the invitee in question, who then officially accedes to the Washington Treaty and thus becomes an equal Party to the Alliance, with all the obligations and rights granted thereafter²⁷.

Partnership for Peace Programme

The Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme includes a series of bilateral cooperation agreements that can be signed between the Alliance and any individual Euro-Atlantic or global Partner, also referred to as "NATO Partners". They constitute an entry-level commitment to the possibility of collective security actions between Allies and specific non-Allied States, with regard to virtually every field of NATO activity, including defence reforms and planning, civil-military relations, education and training, civil emergency response, and cooperation on science and environmental issues²⁸. Most critically, the 2011 renewed Partnerships Policy introduced the opportunity for Partners to join NATO's military activities and exercises, as well as thematic inter-Alliance discussion forums such as the Mediterranean Dialogue or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, without officially joining the Alliance²⁹.

The signing of a PfP Agreement and the imminent creation of an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) with NATO, does not require that the Partner in question aspires to seek NATO Membership at any point in the future. The first steps of basic

²⁶ "Enlargement and Article 10", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/enlargement-and-article-10>

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ "Partnership for Peace Programme", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-for-peace-programme>

²⁹ *ibid*

cooperation that may - if successful - lead to a state's accession are always taken within the PfP Framework³⁰.

Membership Action Plan

When a NATO Partner expresses complete or even moderate interest to officially join the Alliance, the NAC may agree to create an individually tailored Membership Action Plan (MAP) for the state in question. A MAP requires that the participating countries submit individual annual national programmes on their preparations for possible future membership, which cover political, economic, defence, resource, security and legal aspects. The focus is largely concentrated on the aspirant's ability to contribute substantially to the Alliance's defence mechanisms and strategic goals. The NAC then carefully assesses the aspirant's progress, provides feedback and practical assistance with regard to the aspirant's potential shortcomings and establishes clear targets that the aspirant ought to reach³¹.

If the progress is deemed satisfactory by the NAC, an official invitation to join NATO is granted to the MAP candidate. The participation in a MAP, however, does not irrevocably adjudge that a Partner will eventually accede to the Alliance - both the NAC and the aspiring Partner maintain the authority to temporarily suspend or end the MAP progress, in the case of significantly limited progress or unwillingness to proceed with the plan³².

Dayton Peace Agreement

The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also known as the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), Dayton Accords was reached at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, United States, in November 1995. These accords put an end to the 3 1/2-year-long Bosnian War. They were signed by the three warring parties (Bosnia and Herzegovina, formerly the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/currently Serbia, and

³⁰ NATO HQ Sarajevo, "MAP, RP, PfP - all the acronyms explained", NATO, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/hqsarajevo/we-are-nato/map--rp--pfp-all-the-acronyms-explained>

³¹ "Membership Action Plan (MAP)", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/membership-action-plan-map>

³² NATO HQ Sarajevo, "MAP, RP, PfP - all the acronyms explained", NATO, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/hqsarajevo/we-are-nato/map--rp--pfp-all-the-acronyms-explained>

Croatia). Additionally, Annex 4 of the DPA has thereafter served as the current Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina³³.

Under the framework, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a single state which consists of two semi-autonomous political entities, exerting control over two different territories: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), comprising the Bosniak Muslim- and Croat-majority areas, and Republika Srpska (RS), comprising the Serb-majority area. The Bosnian government is a federal democratic republic consisting of a three-member Presidency, each member representing a different ethnic fraction in BiH (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats) and rotatingly assuming the position of Head of State. FBiH and RS have separate constitutions - that ought, however, to be compatible with the aforementioned Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina -, separate parliaments and other distinct public institutions³⁴.

The Dayton Accords also created the position of an international High Representative, responsible for supervising the implementation of the Agreement's conditions. The Representative also maintains the jurisdiction to remove public officials from office and impose legislation on both sub-states, if necessary for the upholding of the Agreement³⁵.

6. Main Discussion of the Topic

6.1. Accession Dynamics in the Western Balkans: Country-Specific Assessment

6.1.1 Republic of Serbia

The history of NATO-Serbian relations is primarily defined by the Alliance's intervention in the Bosnian War in 1995 and in the Kosovo War in 1999. The latter and most important one, code-named "Operation Allied Force", was a 78-day intervention launched without UN Security Council approval to end ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. It came as a result of the breakdown of

³³ "Dayton Peace Agreement", OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, <https://bih.osce.org/bih/126173>

³⁴ Fella, Stefano, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Dayton agreement and political system", House of Commons Library - UK Parliament, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10434/>

³⁵ *ibid*

negotiations in Rambouillet, France, where the Alliance's proposition for an autonomous Kosovo within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, guaranteed by the presence of a NATO-led force, was rejected by Belgrade. During the operations, Allied forces held together during 78 days of air strikes in which more than 38,000 missions were flown without a single fatality.³⁶ This conflict, which remains a cornerstone of Serbian national identity and skepticism toward the West, concluded with the Kumanovo Agreement³⁷ and the deployment of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) peacekeeping mission, consisting of approximately 5,200 troops provided by 33 Allied and partner countries. That contributes to maintaining a safe and secure environment for all people and communities living in Kosovo.³⁸

Following the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, relations took a pragmatic but slow turn towards western realignment. Although Serbia joined international institutions like the UN or the World Bank, joining NATO proved to be far more difficult than expected, since the memory of the bombings was still vivid, and nationalist sentiment was shared by a large share of the political elite, too. Serbia joined a Partnership for Peace in the Riga Summit³⁹ in 2006, but in 2007 the Parliament adopted a Resolution on military neutrality, which legally forbids it from joining any military bloc. The Serbian Government, under the pro-western President Boris Tadić attempted to enter into a Membership Action Plan in 2010. This was met with fierce internal opposition, primarily due to the West's recognition of Kosovo's Independence declaration in 2008, and the government had to back down. Over the last two decades, cooperation has quietly expanded through Serbia entering an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2015, focusing on disaster relief, defense reform, and scientific cooperation.

Today Serbia regularly participates in NATO military exercises in areas like defense reform, interoperability and peacekeeping preparation within the context of the Partnership for Peace program. It is also hosting a joint civil protection exercise with the Alliance in 2018.

³⁶ "Kosovo Air Campaign (March-June 1999)", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/kosovo-air-campaign-march-june-1999>

³⁷ Filipovski. 2024. "25 Years since the Kumanovo Agreement: - DWP-BALKAN," DWP-BALKAN, June 25, 2024, <https://dwp-balkan.org/25-years-since-the-kumanovo-agreement/>.

³⁸ Britannica, "Kosovo Conflict," In *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kosovo-conflict>

³⁹ "Fifteen Years of Serbia's Membership in the Partnership for Peace: Cooperation Stable, the Public Uninformed," Support4Partnership, 2021, <https://support4partnership.org/en/news/fifteen-years-of-serbias-membership-in-the-partnership-for-peace-cooperation-stable-the-public-uninformed>

Even after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, unlike other European Nations that joined NATO, President Vucic has reaffirmed his unwillingness to follow, stating that the current relationship is sufficient. Despite this high level of practical interoperability, attempts to approach the Alliance further are politically impossible due to public support for full membership remaining overwhelmingly low.⁴⁰

6.1.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) constitutes a Western Balkan partly-coastal state of Southeastern Europe that borders the Adriatic Sea, as well as two NATO Allies (Croatia and Montenegro) and Serbia⁴¹.

The aforementioned inherently trilateral ethnic nature of BiH - in contrast to other former-Yugoslav nations that were mostly dominated by a single ethnic group - emerged after the BiH declared its Independence from the Serbia-dominated former Yugoslavia in 1992. Although the Bosniak and Croat parts of the population majorly supported the independence, the Bosnian Serbs violently expressed their disagreement by seeking separation from the other two BiH ethnicities and executing what they described as an “ethnic cleansing” to drive out Bosniak Muslims from territories with a Serbian majority⁴². Incidents such as the Serbian siege of the BiH Capital Sarajevo⁴³ and the massacres such as that of 7500 Bosniak Muslims near the town Srebrenica⁴⁴ (1995), led NATO to intervene through a series of increasingly escalating non-military and military measures. In the first stages of war (1992-1993) NATO’s involvement remained complementary to that of the UN, by enforcing the UN-mandated “no-fly zone” over the BiH and providing practical and military support to the UN Peacekeeping Mission in BiH⁴⁵. During the late stages (1994-1995), however, in the wake of the aforementioned siege and the Srebrenica Massacre, NATO executed air-operations in

⁴⁰ “Relations with Serbia”, NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-serbia>.

⁴¹ “Bosnia and Herzegovina: an Introduction”, GlobalEdge, <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/bosnia-and-herzegovina>

⁴² “Bosnian Civil War, 1992-1225”, EBSCO Information Services, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/bosnian-civil-war-1992-1995#bibliography>

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ Bureau for European and Canadian Affairs, “Fact Sheet: NATO Involvement in the Balkan Crisis”, US Department of State, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/natobalk.html>

Serb-affiliated areas per the request of the UN, which culminated in the NATO Operation Deliberate Force⁴⁶ (1995) against Serb-related targets in the greater BiH region⁴⁷. Thereafter, the parties came to the conclusion that the gravity of the situation required a re-negotiation of a potential heavy arms withdrawal from both sides: thus, through substantial political processes a ceasefire was reached between the BiH, Croatia and Yugoslavia, culminating in the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords (1995) and the creation of the NATO-led International Force (IFOR) in BiH with the purpose of implementing the military aspects of the peace agreement⁴⁸. After the cessation of hostilities, IFOR was replaced by NATO's Standing Forces (SFOR) which undertook the area's post-war infrastructure, until 2004⁴⁹. The BiH also maintains a SOFA with the Alliance, which outlines regulations and freedoms for the consensual stationing and operation of NATO forces in the territory of the BiH⁵⁰.

Following the aforementioned peace process, the interplay between NATO and BiH has shifted from military interference and peace enforcement measures to gradual, yet firm steps towards strategic cooperation, institutional reform and even the potential for a future NATO accession. Indeed, BiH currently constitutes the sole Euroatlantic state undergoing the process of a Membership Action Plan, which was proposed in 2010 and officially commenced in 2018, when the BiH submitted its first annual Progress Report to the NAC⁵¹. The 8-year delay between the proposal and the official commencement relies significantly on the following impediment: the most crucial condition the NAC mandated for the MAP, was that the plan would activate only after the complete registration of all regional immovable defense properties (a total of 63 locations containing military bases, training grounds and resource infrastructure dedicated to military use - 23 of which reside within Republica Srpska), as

⁴⁶ Tirpak, John, "Deliberate Force", Air and Space Forces Magazine, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/1097deliberate/>

⁴⁷ Bureau for European and Canadian Affairs, "Fact Sheet: NATO Involvement in the Balkan Crisis", US Department of State, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/natobalk.html>

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ "Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

⁵⁰ "Partnership for Peace Status of Forces Agreement", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/partnership-for-peace-status-of-forces-agreement>

⁵¹ "Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

rightful state property of the BiH⁵². The authorities of Republika Srpska (RS), however, refuse to relinquish the control of former Yugoslav People's Army facilities located on the sub state's territory to the Bosnian Ministry of Defense, arguing that military assets residing in RS territory shall only be controlled by the RS and appealing to the Bosnian State Court in an attempt to gain absolute claim over these immovable assets - once in 2012 and once in 2017. However, the Court adjudged both times that these military assets rightfully belong to the Bosnian State's control, the RS Authorities refused the decision, publicly claimed that the Constitutional Court's decision violated the RS Constitution and they also threatened to independently hold a national referendum with the aim of further challenging the court's verdict⁵³.

As of today, the military property issue remains unresolved with no comprehensive legal solution found. Despite the exemplary progress that the BiH has demonstrated with regard to accession-related reforms and its ever-evolving cooperation with NATO, the MAP still hinges on the property dispute and other policy discrepancies between the Bosnian Federal Republic and the Republika Srpska authorities⁵⁴. Although the NAC expresses an optimistic and supportive stance towards the BiH's commitment to overcoming political-consensus obstacles and deepening ties with NATO⁵⁵, the question arises whether the 20-year MAP requires a series of more drastic bilateral cooperation measures in order to display significant reform progress⁵⁶.

⁵² Kovacevic, Daniel, "Bosnian Military Property Dispute Bars Way to NATO", Balkan Transitional Justice, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/11/23/bosnia-constitutional-court-mulls-key-military-property-issue-11-22-2016/btj/>

⁵³ ibid

⁵⁴ Kardunic, Erdin, "Bosnia's state property: the frontline of sovereignty and Europe's security", New Eastern Europe, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2025/10/23/bosnias-state-property-the-frontline-of-sovereignty-and-europes-security/>

⁵⁵ "NATO Partnership Conference 2026 opens in Sarajevo", NATO HQ Sarajevo, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/hqsarajevo/news-at-sarajevo/2026/nato-partnership-conference-2026-opens-in-sarajevo>

⁵⁶ "Adoption Of The Reform Program Of BiH 2025 Will Be Another Step Toward Membership In NATO", Sarajevo Times, <https://sarajevotimes.com/adoption-of-the-reform-program-of-bih-2025-will-be-another-step-toward-membership-in-nato/>

6.2. NATO's Open Door Policy as a Tool for Strategic Reinforcement

In NATO's 1995 Study on Enlargement⁵⁷, the Alliance considered the merits of admitting new Members deriving from the newly-generated pool of post-Soviet States - most of which declared independence in 1991 and expressed interest in joining NATO, almost immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union. The study characterized this predicament as a unique opportunity to build improved security in the entire Euro-Atlantic area, and utilize the Open Door Policy as a tool for advancing Allied capabilities, security systems and strategic posture⁵⁸, in ways such as the following:

Strategic Stabilization of Post-Conflict or Conflict-Affected States

The first step of NATO's post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction operations - especially for NATO aspirant countries - is establishing a secure environment through NATO-led missions. The missions are tasked with eliminating violent threats that may disrupt freedom of movement for the civilians or the enforcement of law and order, until civilian institutions can function freely again⁵⁹. In the case of post-conflict Kosovo and post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, this task was or is still carried out by NATO's KFOR⁶⁰ and IFOR-SFOR⁶¹ units respectively. As a second step, NATO operations help to restore basic public services and infrastructure in the post-conflict area. As a third step - and with a more long-term scope - NATO's stabilization missions remain partly engaged until the aforementioned stabilization activities have been successfully executed and the state's authorities are deemed capable to maintain a secure environment and lead the country toward sustained multidimensional

⁵⁷ "Study on NATO Enlargement", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1995/09/03/study-on-nato-enlargement>

⁵⁸ "Enlargement and Article 10", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/enlargement-and-article-10>

⁵⁹ "Political guidance on ways to improve NATO's involvement in stabilisation and reconstruction", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2011/09/23/political-guidance-on-ways-to-improve-natos-involvement-in-stabilisation-and-reconstruction>

⁶⁰ "NATO's role in Kosovo", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/natos-role-in-kosovo>

⁶¹ "Peace support operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995-2004)", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/peace-support-operations-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-1995-2004>

progress. Thereafter, the missions retire and the Alliance proceeds with deeper cooperation and reform programs for the post-conflict states in question⁶².

Overall, through the post-conflict stabilization process NATO ensures the following: Initially, NATO eliminates a potential security threat to the Euro-Atlantic as a whole, by neutralizing an unstable situation and thus preventing a spillover effect to neighboring Allied territory. Secondly, NATO's direct post-conflict engagement renders the Alliance as the main arbiter of stability and reconstruction aid, forming close ties, common security practices and ample ground for future cooperation between the post-conflict state and the Alliance⁶³.

Structured Reform Framework in line with NATO Principles

Either with regard to a post-conflict state, or to a state whose internal political dynamics, resource distribution and security system prevent the state mechanism from reaching its full operation potential - NATO's MAP Programme provides a structured reform framework to all aspirant member states⁶⁴. The individually tailored reform programmes for each MAP Participant cover 5 core policy areas, as a manifestation of NATO's Open Door Policy:

1. Political and Economic Reforms, where the public institutions of an aspirant shall demonstrate commitment to democracy and the rule of law, respect human rights and individual liberty and ensure steady and sustainable economic growth that can support a potential Ally's future financial and political commitments to the Alliance⁶⁵.
2. Defence and Military Reforms, with the aim of ensuring that the security system, military property and strategic values of an aspirant country, fully subscribe to NATO's purpose, core tasks and military contribution standards⁶⁶.

⁶² "Political guidance on ways to improve NATO's involvement in stabilisation and reconstruction", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2011/09/23/political-guidance-on-ways-to-improve-natos-involvement-in-stabilisation-and-reconstruction>

⁶³ ibid

⁶⁴ "Membership Action Plan (MAP), as approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1999/04/24/membership-action-plan-map>

⁶⁵ ibid

⁶⁶ ibid

3. Resource-related reforms, to help states establish national budgetary and administrative systems that are capable of allocating sufficient defence spending to the Alliance, without disrupting the state's other budgetary commitments⁶⁷.
4. Security reforms with regard to capably safeguarding sensitive NATO information, such as military communications and strategic or scientific intelligence - with Accordance to NATO's Agreement on the Security of Information (1997)⁶⁸.
5. Legal reforms, ensuring that the aspirant's national legislation becomes fully compatible with NATO's existing regulations, such as the Washington Treaty and the SOFA⁶⁹.

Consolidation of NATO's Security Architecture and Exclusive Strategic Influence in South Eastern Europe

From a geographical perspective, the non-Allied Western Balkan countries constitute one of the very few remaining territorial gaps in NATO's Euro-Atlantic Security Architecture. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia are entirely surrounded by Southeastern and Central European NATO Allies - thus, their positioning creates a "grey zone" of ambiguous territory that geographically divides the Alliance's Eastern Flank from the core of the European Continent and - most importantly - prevents the creation of an east-to-west unified NATO military structure. A potential accession of these Western Balkan nations would significantly enhance interoperability, interconnectivity and regional defence coordination⁷⁰.

The negative impact of this territorial gap, however, may extend far beyond a geographical barrier that hinders connectivity: the Western Balkan states that are not incorporated in NATO's institutional framework, lack any form of security guarantees by the Alliance in case of an armed attack⁷¹. Furthermore, the non-accessed nations do not operate under a binding

⁶⁷ *ibid*

⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ Eduard, Vasilj, "Reintegrating the Western Balkans: Strategic Imperatives for EU and NATO", Global Policy - Durham University, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/05/09/2025/reintegrating-western-balkans-strategic-imperatives-eu-and-nato>

⁷¹ "The Protracted Path of the Western Balkans toward NATO Integration", TRENDS Research and Advisory - Belgium Virtual Office, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/the-protracted-path-of-the-western-balkans-toward-nato-integration/?srsltid=AfmBOooxdYxijuBNEuS5Stf-ARNUnRhnrTiOKVH2Y0W7q7sZqbDyPbeS>

framework of Allied military commitments and political obligations, thus granting NATO no consolidated “monopoly” of influence over their strategic decisions and actions. As a result, the non-Member Western Balkan nations still remain a “geopolitical playground” for non-Allied third actors, who seek to exert their strategic influence over this strategically important region of the North Atlantic⁷².

6.3 External Influence and Geopolitical Competition in the Western Balkans

The most critical component of the Alliance’s common security strategy is collective threat perception. With the prospect of ensuring peace and stability in the North Atlantic Region, NATO views some sectors of its own development spectrum as directly threatened targeting the Allied security, in the Euro-Atlantic States and the wider transatlantic community⁷³. Specifically, apart from the establishment of spheres of influence and direct control on behalf of powerful and influential countries against NATO Allies and Partners, the challenge is deeply related to the actual development structures and Allied actions’ framework field, which for sure entails the geopolitical element due to the Alliance’s location between Europe, Asia and America, hybrid threats that tend to gradually increase, such as the energy security sector, the weaponization of information and disinformation frameworks, as a key- element when it comes institutional trust and stability, but also, the sector of Allied Operations, which can potentially be directly destabilized and face security risks emanating from factors connected to the location of some of its Member States and specifically the Balkans .

Simultaneously, the Alliance perceives China’s stated ambitions and coercive policies with regard to the Euro-Atlantic region as a significant challenge to NATO’s interests, security and values. China employs a broad range of political and economic tools with the aim of increasing its global influence⁷⁴. Namely, it aims to exert economic leverage over NATO Allies and Partners, and to create strategic dependencies by controlling key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, strategic materials and supply chains in the North Atlantic region. Thus, the Alliance remains apprehensive of China’s increasing economic engagement

⁷² *ibid*

⁷³ “2022 Strategic Concept”, NATO, June 29, 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

⁷⁴ “2022 Strategic Concept”, NATO, June 29, 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

in the North Atlantic, its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation campaigns targeting Allies, as well as its deepening partnership with the Russian Federation⁷⁵.

In the case of the Western Balkans the Alliance views the involvement of both the Russian Federation⁷⁶ and China⁷⁷ with increased concern, as both actors attempt to exert their influence in the territory of NATO's Western Balkan Allies, Partners, and Aspirant Members.

6.3.1 The Geopolitical Challenge

Historically, the Western Balkans have been a region of geostrategic importance for the Euro-Atlantic community. Undoubtedly, the consequences of such an importance can lead to threats and challenges that would bring the region in a position of encountering potential malign foreign influence due to its location and advantageous options of action. Following the geopolitical shifts of recent decades, the Alliance has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to the region's stability, supporting the democratic aspirations of local populations and their deeper Euro-Atlantic integration through NATO's Open Door Policy. However, this consensus-driven alignment with Western democratic standards faces a direct challenge from the Russian Federation's destabilizing agenda.

Historically, Moscow has wielded considerable influence in the region due to cultural and ethnic similarities between itself and local populations, primarily Serbia⁷⁸. Nevertheless, the breakup of Yugoslavia severely weakened Moscow's strategic engagement in the region, resulting in Balkan states seeking deeper integration with the West, including accession to the Alliance. Moscow seeks to obstruct regional accession to the Alliance, aiming to project power, maintain geopolitical dependencies, and restrict Western Balkan states from participating in the shared Euro-Atlantic security and arms market.

In addition to the utilization of its soft power, Russia has demonstrated a clear willingness to directly intervene with the aim of diverting its Western Balkan partners from integrating into

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "2025 - WESTERN BALKANS: 30 YEARS SINCE SIGNING OF THE DAYTON ACCORDS", NATO, October 11, 2025, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-western-balkans-report-valasek-019-pc>

⁷⁷ *ibid*

⁷⁸ Stanicek, Branislav, and Anna Caprile. 2023. "Russia and the Western Balkans." [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747096_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf).

Euro-Atlantic structures, when strategically expedient, even if it oversteps the boundaries of traditional soft power. Moscow is Serbia's most reliable ally in the Kosovo dispute, and its biggest arms exporter, emboldening it to adopt more confrontational positions.⁷⁹ Furthermore, it has also blocked the recognition of Kosovo by threatening to use its veto power in the Security Council. As a result, provocative actions by Moscow's regional allies have affected countries across the Balkans, causing multiple security crises and further deepening ethnic tensions.

The second Great Power that has been trying to increase its influence in the Balkans, is the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beijing exerts most of its financial power through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is an infrastructure mega-project that aims to enhance connectivity, trade, and communication across Eurasia, Latin America, and Africa. China began engaging in the Balkans in 2014 with the Pupin Bridge construction in Belgrade, one year after the BRI was established. Ever since, cooperation has only expanded with Chinese companies having entered numerous economic sectors, from steel production to energy and renewables and even mineral extraction.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, increasing dependency of Balkan States on Chinese financing poses a significant risk to the political stability and reform progress of Western Balkan states themselves, and thus to the North Atlantic Alliance's strategic engagement in the region. Beyond the political risks posed by China's growing influence in the Western Balkans, Beijing's central role in the modernization of digital infrastructure in the region could potentially develop into a major security concern for NATO, since it has raised concerns over the possible emergence of coveted entry points that could be exploited for cyber attacks, as well as other forms of strategic leverage that would undermine regional security in NATO's Western Balkan neighborhood.

The cumulative rise in tensions poses a grave security risk, endangering NATO operations in the region, undermining the success of Serbia's Partnership Programme and BiH's Membership Action Plan and generating new crises that demand the Alliance's attention to

⁷⁹ "Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans." 2019. Atlantic Council. December 20, 2019.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-strategic-interests-and-tools-of-influence-in-the-western-balkans/>.

⁸⁰ "Serbia – European Council on Foreign Relations", ECFR, <https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/serbia/#content>.

address, diverting its focus away from the war in Ukraine.⁸¹ Consequently, the Kremlin deploys a sophisticated array of hybrid and asymmetric tools, systematically exploiting historic grievances and ethnic vulnerabilities to polarize local political environments and derail the Alliance's stabilization initiatives.

6.3.2 Energy Security as a hybrid threat

On the economic front, the Alliance views the strategic exploitation of critical infrastructure as a core component of hostile hybrid strategies. This geopolitical shift represents a direct challenge to the Kremlin's interests, as the integration of Western Balkan states into NATO, and subsequently the EU, would diminish their reliance on Russian energy, thereby eroding Moscow's economic leverage, while also excluding it from the regional arms' market.⁸² Moscow leverages its state-owned enterprises and targeted investments to exert undue political influence over key regional decision-makers. This vulnerability is most pronounced within the energy sector of partner nations such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where near-total reliance on Russian gas supplies and corporate assets—including extensive supply networks like Lukoil—is weaponized as an instrument of political coercion. This energy dependency directly undermines allied efforts to foster economic resilience and solidarity. A clear example occurred on May 29, 2022, when Serbia secured a new three-year gas contract with Moscow, deliberately cutting across the broader Euro-Atlantic framework of energy diversification and sanctions⁸³. Nevertheless, due to coordinated Allied engagement and the enforcement of international standards, Russia's overall trade footprint is steadily diminishing. The European Union and its member states remain the leading foreign direct investors (exceeding 50% FDI in most regional economies). As critical projects threaten the monopoly of infrastructure like the TurkStream pipeline, the Alliance must continue to support regional partners in pursuing sustainable energy diversification to neutralize external leverage.

⁸¹ Stradner, Ivana. 2025. "Rising Tensions in the Balkans Divert Attention Away from Ukraine." FDD. April 4, 2025. https://www.fdd.org/in_the_news/2025/04/04/rising-tensions-in-the-balkans-divert-attention-away-from-ukraine/.

⁸² "The Balance of Power in the Balkans." 2020. Harvard International Review. December 30, 2020. <https://hir.harvard.edu/balkans-balance-of-power/>.

⁸³ "Serbia Secures Gas Deal with Putin, as West Boycotts Russia." n.d. [www.aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/29/serbia-ignores-eu-sanctions-secures-gas-deal-with-putin). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/29/serbia-ignores-eu-sanctions-secures-gas-deal-with-putin>.

6.3.3. Weaponization of information and disinformation frameworks

Beyond economic pressure, adversary actors utilize aggressive information operations to undermine public trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Malign -mostly Russian-led- disinformation campaigns, disseminated via social media and state-backed news outlets, specifically target public perceptions by manipulating past regional conflicts and military interventions such as Operation Allied Force⁸⁴. These disinformation campaigns serve a dual, adversarial purpose: first, by stoking aggressive nationalistic sentiments, they deliberately freeze progress toward lasting political resolutions of ethnic disputes, which are fundamental for regional stabilization and closer ties with the Alliance. Second, they propagate anti-NATO rhetoric to sway public perception, aiming to make the prospect of Euro-Atlantic partnership politically unpopular. Furthermore, hostile forces may also cooperate with local actors to exploit ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences, aiming to widen the gap between pro-Western elements and nationalist elements⁸⁵. Such examples are the now under EU sanctions “Sputnik Srbija” online news website, charities linked to the Orthodox Church and the Russian- Serbian Humanitarian Centre⁸⁶. This coordinated polarization can potentially paralyze the internal decision-making processes that can lead to crucial partnership frameworks, such as the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) or Individual Partnership Progress Reports. The truth is, that the degree of permeability to foreign influence and interference across the region varies, reflecting the different internal vulnerabilities of the Western Balkan countries in several domains (societal, economic, and political). According to a permeability index developed by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, North Macedonia and Albania were identified as least vulnerable countries, while Bosnia and Herzegovina appeared to be the most vulnerable country, followed by Serbia⁸⁷.

⁸⁴ Peeters, Trevor. 2026. “Russia’s Hybrid War in the Balkans - Eastern European and Transatlantic Network.” Eastern European and Transatlantic Network. January 5, 2026. <https://carleton.ca/eetn/2026/russias-hybrid-war-in-the-balkans/>.

⁸⁵ “Russia’s Influence in the Balkans | Council on Foreign Relations.” 2022. Cfr.org. December 2, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/russias-influence-balkans>.

⁸⁶ Stanicek, Branislav, and Anna Caprile. 2023. “Russia and the Western Balkans.” [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747096_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf).

⁸⁷ Stanicek, Branislav, and Anna Caprile. “Russia and the Western Balkans,” April 2023. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)747096_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf).

6.3.4 Direct Destabilization and Security Risks to Allied Operations

Apart from the aforementioned hybrid tactics, direct external interference poses conventional security risks to active Allied operations and regional security, driven again mostly by Moscow's geopolitical ambitions⁸⁸ and Beijing's expanding goals. Hostile authoritarian regimes often induce regional actors to adopt provocative stances that challenge international legal frameworks, such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244⁸⁹. This external support can lead many local factions to instigate severe political friction, such as the persistent refusal by entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to register immovable defense properties and former Yugoslav People's Army facilities to state-level defense authorities, which directly stalls the activation of the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Furthermore, these destabilizing coordinated efforts are also enhanced by external defense and military-technical cooperation agreements, including providing supplies of foreign weapon systems from both Russia and the People's Republic of China⁹⁰, which undermines NATO efforts to standardize regional interoperability. These actions are aiming to create a threat for localized crises and war scares, forcing in that way a tactical shift of the North Atlantic Council's attention, political focus, and intelligence resources away from the Eastern Flank⁹¹. These coordinated provocations have triggered severe security crises, directly endangering NATO personnel and operations on the ground. As an example, a critical escalation occurred in 2023 in Zvečan, where unprovoked violence by organized groups resulted in injuries to more than 90 NATO-led KFOR peacekeepers⁹². Thus, ensuring deterrence against these proxy-driven disruptions is vital for safeguarding the operational

⁸⁸ "Untarnished by War: Why Russia's Soft Power Is so Resilient in Serbia." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2023, carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/01/untarnished-by-war-why-russias-soft-power-is-so-resilient-in-serbia.

⁸⁹ "NATO and the European Union Discuss Stability in the Western Balkans." 2026. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). 2026. <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2026/03/17/nato-and-the-european-union-discuss-stability-in-the-western-balkans>.

⁹⁰ Stradner, Ivana. "China's Beachhead in the Balkans." *FDD*, 29 Apr. 2026, www.fdd.org/analysis/2026/04/29/chinas-beachhead-in-the-balkans/.

⁹¹ Gippert, Birte. 2025. "Bosnia and Herzegovina in Crisis as Bosnian-Serb President Rallies for Secession." Edited by Jonathan Este, July. <https://doi.org/10.64628/ab.46n3i7uge>.

⁹² CNA. 2024. "KFOR Demands Responsibility for the Wounding of over 90 of Its Members a Year Ago in Northern Kosovo." CNA, <https://www.cna.al/english/kosova-bota/kfor-kerkon-pergjegjesi-per-plagosjen-embi-90-pjesetareve-te-tij-nj-i399774>.

integrity of active NATO missions, neutralizing external coercive leverage, and preventing conflict spillover into adjacent Allied territory.

NATO's stake in the Western Balkans

Russia and China are not the only actors with interest in the region of the Western Balkans. The region which has been characterized as Europe's inner courtyard⁹³ is one of the most important strategic regions in the European continent. The reason is that if China manages to infiltrate the Western Balkans economically it will gain a foothold in the European Markets without any effective opposition⁹⁴. On the other hand if Russia manages to continue exploiting ethnic and religious minorities in the region the opportunity will rise for a wider destabilization of the Balkan region and the European Continent as a whole⁹⁵. Thus NATO must act as a preventative and stabilizing force in the region in order to ensure the stability of the Southern European region as a whole.

Furthermore, NATO's role in the Western Balkans should not only be preventative but also proportionally expansive. More specifically, it is important to remember that NATO was created to counterbalance Russia and this is a role that it still needs to fulfil to this day. By integrating the Western Balkans into the Alliance, NATO will have the ability to create a stronger and more resilient network against possible eastern threats.

6.4. Key Stakeholders

European Union

In the matter of NATO's strategic enlargement in the Western Balkans, the EU constitutes NATO's most crucial institutional partner in ensuring stability through this geopolitically volatile region. The two organizations share the common goal of integrating Western Balkan nations into collective Euro-Atlantic structures, having already agreed on a concerted

⁹³ Auswärtiges Amt. "The Western Balkans Are Europe's Inner Courtyard." *German Federal Foreign Office*, 2018, www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/roth-frankfurter-allgemeine-zeitung-2102816

⁹⁴ WEI, LIAO. "CHINA and the WESTERN BALKANS: ECONOMIC COOPERATION in a GLOBAL GEOECONOMIC FRAMEWORK." *Lex Localis - Journal of Local Self-Government*, vol. 23, no. S5, UK Zhende Publishing Limited Company, Aug. 2025, pp. 1232–55, <https://doi.org/10.52152/801366>

⁹⁵ Valasek, Tomas. "2025 - WESTERN BALKANS - REPORT - VALASEK - 019 PC | NATO PA." *NATO PA*, 21 Nov. 2025, www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-western-balkans-report-valasek-019-pc

approach, deciding to coordinate their action with regard to stabilization efforts and necessary reforms in the Western Balkans⁹⁶.

NATO and the EU's actions in this regard are complementary to each other - while NATO's reform programs mostly center on military, defense, civil security and budgetary systems, the EU's reform and diplomacy frameworks, such as the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)⁹⁷ and the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue⁹⁸, help by focusing on economic and political reforms. Thus, the EU's efforts for creating a democratic and prosperous socioeconomic environment in the Western Balkans, can create a stable environment that facilitates NATO's defence and security-targeted reforms. Thus, the Western Balkans' EU accession can be seen as a parallel process to their NATO integration⁹⁹.

Furthermore, EU Security Missions in the Western Balkans significantly complement or supplement the corresponding NATO-led missions in the region. The EU's Military Mission known as "Operation ALTHEA"¹⁰⁰ (EUFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, succeeded the NATO Missions of IFOR and SFOR in the region after a bilateral NATO-EU decision, undertaking all of their peacekeeping duties and ensuring the continued compliance of all parties with the Dayton Accords¹⁰¹. Secondly, the EU's Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo¹⁰² (EULEX Kosovo) supports the Kosovo authorities in establishing sustainable and independent democratic institutions, as well as compliments the Kosovo Police's security operations if

⁹⁶ "EU and NATO agree concerted approach for the Western Balkans", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2003/07/29/eu-and-nato-agree-concerted-approach-for-the-western-balkans>

⁹⁷ European Union, "Stabilisation and Accession Process", EUR-LEX, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/stabilisation-and-association-process.html>

⁹⁸ European Union, "Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue", EEAS, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue_en

⁹⁹ "EU and NATO agree concerted approach for the Western Balkans", NATO, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2003/07/29/eu-and-nato-agree-concerted-approach-for-the-western-balkans>

¹⁰⁰ European Union, "EUFOR BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA Military Operation ALTHEA", EEAS, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eufor-althea/eufor-bosnia-herzegovina-military-operation-althea_and_en?s=324

¹⁰¹ *ibid*

¹⁰² European Union, "EULEX Kosovo: European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo - Civilian Mission", https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eulex-kosovo/eulex-kosovo-european-union-rule-law-mission-kosovo-civilian-mission_and_en?s=333

necessary. Thus, EULEX Kosovo works alongside NATO's KFOR, as the two cooperate to extinguish any remaining post-conflict societal or political instabilities within Kosovo¹⁰³.

Albania

Albania has been characterized as a "NATO Anchor" in the Western Balkans, with a dual role: on the one hand, Albania's internal political environment is characterized by increased stability, as compared to its non-accessed Western Balkan neighbors, and can thus act as a positive example of euro-atlantic integration and progress¹⁰⁴. On the other hand, Albania's strategic engagement in the Kosovo-Serbia dispute and its firm pro-Kosovo political stance, motivated by the strong presence of Albanian ethnic majority in Kosovo and other Western Balkan states, remains a historical feud that significantly impacts contemporary Albanian-Serbian relations¹⁰⁵.

In 2008, Albania became the first country to recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state after the latter declared its independence from Serbia, after decades of politically and even militarily supporting Kosovo's territorial sovereignty. Thereafter, Albania - per the ardent request of Albanians residing in Kosovo, who also hold the majority of police and public authority positions in Kosovo - has continuously supported the integration of Kosovo into Euro-Atlantic structures, such as NATO or the EU¹⁰⁶. Simultaneously, the radical anti-Serb stance of the Albanian citizens of Kosovo, has significantly influenced not only Kosovo-Serb relations, but Albanian-Serb relations as well¹⁰⁷. In order to minimize such geopolitical tensions among them, the current Serbian and Albanian governments of Aleksandar Vučić and Edi Rama respectively, have recently carried out a limited number of official reconciliation attempts between Albania and Serbia, such as participating in the socio-economic Open Balkan

¹⁰³ ibid

¹⁰⁴ Vlahčević Lisinski, Klara, "How Albania Became the Anchor of NATO's Balkan Strategy", Western Balkans Center, <https://westernbalkanscenter.org/article/how-albania-became-the-anchor-of-natos-balkan-strategy>

¹⁰⁵ ibid

¹⁰⁶ "Northern Kosovo: Asserting Sovereignty amid Divided Loyalties", International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo/269-northern-kosovo-asserting-sovereignty-amid-divided-loyalties>

¹⁰⁷ ibid

Initiative in bilateral good faith¹⁰⁸. Kosovo, however, refused to join the initiative, disapproving of Albania's decision to cooperate with Serbia and characterizing Open Balkan as Serbia's attempt to "exploit its economic size for political advantage [...] over its smaller neighbors"¹⁰⁹. Thus, it becomes evident that although these attempts achieved a moderate normalization of Albanian-Serb relations, they failed to alleviate the deeply-rooted geopolitical competition of the two countries over Kosovar sovereignty. This constitutes a factor, which - to this day - may constitute a significant impediment in the NATO-Serbia partnership, in the case of a potentially enhanced future Serbia-NATO cooperation.

United States of America (USA)

The United States has been deeply involved in the Western Balkans since the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Washington played a central role in brokering the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, which ended the Bosnian War, and led NATO's 1999 air campaign to halt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, paving the way for the province's eventual declaration of independence in 2008. The US also supported the Ohrid Framework Agreement that stabilized North Macedonia and facilitated NATO membership for Montenegro (2017) and North Macedonia (2020), while deploying troops in SFOR and later KFOR peacekeeping missions and providing billions in reconstruction aid.¹¹⁰

Today, however, the situation has changed. The change of policy in the United States in regard to their standing within the Alliance has translated into the Western Balkans. The Trump administration has taken steps towards a more stable relationship with Putin's Russia and has reevaluated its relationship with its NATO allies, going as far as reducing the US involvement in the KFOR. However, it still views the Western Balkans as a strategic flank of Europe where instability could invite Russian and Chinese influence and threaten energy security as well as NATO's security as a whole. Its core interests are advancing EU and Euro-Atlantic integration and upholding the sovereignty of the Balkan states by driving out Russian and Chinese

¹⁰⁸ "Regional leaders gather for Open Balkan summit, with Kosovo absence and Russian meddling looming over meeting", Tirana Times, <https://www.tiranatimes.com/regional-leaders-gather-for-open-balkan-summit-with-kosovo-refusal-and-russian-meddling-looming-over-meeting/>

¹⁰⁹ ibid

¹¹⁰ "Reimagining U.S. Policy toward the Western Balkans | European Security, Politics, and Economics | CSIS", Csis.org, <https://www.csis.org/programs/europe-russia-and-eurasia-program/archives/european-security-politics-and-economics-1>.

influence.¹¹¹ To pursue these goals, the US relies on a combination of targeted economic assistance and limited military presence. On the economic front, it channels aid for governance, cybersecurity and infrastructure projects. Militarily, it maintains a contingent in KFOR and supports NATO exercises, even with non-NATO members such as Serbia.¹¹²

Nevertheless, Trump's new National Security Strategy clearly signals a shift in focus from global engagement toward strictly defined U.S. interests, and US policy as a result has become more transactional. This is made apparent by the U.S. opting out of participation in "Steadfast Dart 2025" military exercise, signalling a reduced commitment to military responsibilities thereby forcing Europe to step up its involvement¹¹³, the approachment of Serbia's President Vučić, in exchange for the deal to mine lithium in Serbia's Jadar Valley¹¹⁴ and most controversially, the lifting of sanctions against Milorad Dodik, then-president of Republika Srpska, as well as his family members and allies. These changes illustrate the American Government's will to engage with the Euro-Atlantic community's 'ideological adversaries' if it means stabilizing the region to make it more friendly to investments, and serving US interests¹¹⁵.

Turkiye

Turkey has been involved in the Western Balkans from the era of the Ottoman Empire's five-century rule, which left a lasting cultural imprint, especially among Muslim communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and parts of Serbia. In the 1990s Ankara actively backed Bosniak forces during the Bosnian War and contributed troops to NATO operations¹¹⁶. Later it participated in EUFOR peacekeeping in Bosnia; and was also the second country, after

¹¹¹ "U.S. Commitment to the Western Balkans - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-commitment-to-the-western-balkans/>.

¹¹² "U.S. Diplomacy in the Western Balkans under President Trump", GIS Reports, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/u-s-diplomacy-in-the-western-balkans/>.

¹¹³ "From Stabiliser to Dealmaker? Trump 2.0 and the Western Balkans - ve Insight." 2025. VE Insight. May 7, 2025. <https://ve-insight.com/geopolitics/from-stabiliser-to-dealmaker-trump-2-0-and-the-western-balkans/>.

¹¹⁴ Bassuener, Kurt. 2025. "US Foreign Policy Reorientation Means EU Must Step up Balkan Role." Balkan Insight. December 23, 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/12/23/us-foreign-policy-reorientation-means-eu-must-step-up-balkan-role/bi/>

¹¹⁵ "From Stabiliser to Dealmaker? Trump 2.0 and the Western Balkans - ve Insight." 2025. VE Insight. May 7, 2025. <https://ve-insight.com/geopolitics/from-stabiliser-to-dealmaker-trump-2-0-and-the-western-balkans/>.

¹¹⁶ "Balkans - the Ottomans." n.d. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkans/The-Ottomans>

the US, to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008 and helped establish trilateral mechanisms with Serbia and Bosnia to foster dialogue.¹¹⁷

In order to increase its influence in the region, Türkiye is actively cultivating ties with Muslim populations by expanding trade and infrastructure investments through free-trade agreements. Furthermore, it leverages its history in the region by funding the restoration of Ottoman heritage sites, but it also invests in infrastructure such as roads, airports, and energy projects.¹¹⁸ Türkiye tries to position itself as a constructive regional actor that supports EU and NATO enlargement, but at the same time, it advances its own strategic interests and autonomy.

7. Conclusion

The Western Balkans illustrate how historical and ethnic legacies continue to shape modern geopolitical dynamics, opportunities, and vulnerabilities. As a long-standing actor in the region, NATO has played a key role in post-conflict reconstruction and stability, achieving successes such as Montenegro and North Macedonia's accession, while facing ongoing challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo.

To further consolidate its influence while respecting national sensitivities, NATO must address key obstacles to integration. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, internal political divisions and nationalist legacies slow reforms and hinder MAP progress, requiring efforts to strengthen cohesion among political entities. Relations with Serbia must balance respect for sovereignty and historical grievances with continued cooperation across the region. At the same time, NATO must navigate external pressures from Russia and China, ensuring deterrence and strategic competition are managed carefully to avoid escalation or regional instability.

¹¹⁷ "Spyros A. Sofos Turkey's Presence in the Western Balkans Achieving Cooperation and Sustainable Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina GLOBAL TRANSITIONS SERIES", n.d. <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Turkeys-Presence-in-the-Western-Balkans-DIGITAL.pdf>.

¹¹⁸ Aydıntaşbaş, Asli, "POLICY BRIEF from MYTH to REALITY: HOW to UNDERSTAND TURKEY'S ROLE in the WESTERN BALKANS" https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans.pdf.

8. Points to be Addressed

1. How can the Alliance's Open Door Policy function as a tool for enhancing NATO's strategic engagement in the Western Balkan Region?
2. How can NATO assist the BiH in completing the remaining requirements of its MAP, with regard to civil-military, political and security reforms?
3. How can NATO coordinate with Operation Althea and regional authorities to prevent ethnically-motivated internal violence or political unrest in the BiH and improve NATO's public perception among Serbian citizens?
4. What measures can NATO take to decrease tensions between the Hungary-Serbia Axis and the Kosovo-Albania-Croatia Tripartite given the fact that there are member states involved on both sides?
5. How can the Alliance effectively shield itself from the security risks posed by the growing social and economic influence of third party actors?

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