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## SERBIA'S RELATIONS WITH NATO: THE OTHER (QUIETER) GAME IN TOWN

BY MILAN NIČ AND JÁN CINGEL

While all eyes are set on the formal opening of the EU membership talks with Serbia on 21 January 2014, this policy brief explores the prospects for Belgrade's closer cooperation with NATO. While the EU's accession process is the *force majeure* dominating current political and economic development in the Western Balkans, the regional security architecture is still based on NATO. EU and NATO integration are still considered as mutually reinforcing processes. The main focus in Serbia has shifted to "soft security" issues such as rule of law, justice affairs and fight against corruption, where the EU is in the driving seat.

NATO's continuous engagement in the region has been vital for substantial progress in defence reforms, regional cooperation among national armed forces, and the increasing degree of security ownership among Balkan countries. This applies, above all, to Serbia and Kosovo. Their April 2013 agreement opened the door to the

integration of the Serb-dominated northern part of Kosovo under Pristina's jurisdiction - a huge step forward for regional peace and security. Brokered by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton, it has also indirectly strengthened the NATO's role (through its KFOR mission) to provide overall security on the ground as this historic deal is being implemented. In fact, Belgrade's leadership specifically requested KFOR's involvement, as it deems it is the only military protection of the Kosovo Serbs. By this, KFOR has become security guarantor of the April agreement. Serbia strongly objects to KFOR phase-out plans and hopes that NATO will stay engaged there in a long term.

What does it all mean for Serbia's relations with the Alliance? What are the realistic prospects to intensify their practical cooperation and political relationship this year? To what extent is it linked with Serbia's accession talks with the EU?



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SLOVAK ATLANTIC COMMISSION | CENTRAL EUROPEAN POLICY INSTITUTE  
Klariská 14, 811 03 Bratislava, Slovak Republic | +421254410609  
sac@ata-sac.org | www.ata-sac.org | www.cepolicy.org | www.globsec.org



## PARTNERS, NOT ENEMIES ANYMORE

Serbia is certainly the most complicated but also one of the most relevant NATO partners in the region. It is the only Balkan country which is neither a NATO member nor interested in becoming one in the near future. Officially, Belgrade's declared goal is military neutrality.

Serbia's relations with NATO have been continuously haunted by the legacy of the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 over Kosovo. The Alliance is still hugely unpopular in the country [1]. This puts a limit on the Serbian politicians' ability to publicly acknowledge the real extent and character of the country's evolving partnership with NATO.

On the other hand, as the largest and centrally located Balkan country with the largest professional army in the Western Balkans, Serbia needs to work closely with NATO to protect its interests, modernise its armed forces, and to increase its international profile as a reliable partner and security provider. Another crucial factor is geography: all of Serbia's neighbours are either NATO members (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia) or aspire to join the Alliance in the near future (Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Belgrade even supports the NATO membership bids of its three neighbours, and seeks the inter-operability of its defence systems with those of NATO members and candidates.

In 2006, Serbia joined the Partnership for Peace programme (PfP) becoming a NATO's partner country. Belgrade thus gained access to a number of NATO Committees as well as to its programmes, and became eligible to get support from a range of NATO Funds. It has also joined the Planning and Review Process (PARP), which is the basic tool within the PfP through which the partners can reform their armed forces, adopt NATO standards and achieve higher

interoperability. On its part, NATO opened its Military Liaison Office in Belgrade and pledged to support Serbia in achieving its Partnership goals.

Over time, political and military cooperation between NATO and Serbia have evolved with varying speed and intensity. Serbian defence reforms and modernisation of its armed forces (SAF) have been carried out with NATO's advice and assistance. Selected SAF units [2] have already been certified according to NATO's standards, achieving increased inter-operability for potential deployments in international crisis management operations. Besides Serbia - NATO Defence Reform Group set up by embassies of several members in Belgrade, the Alliance has been active and visible in Serbia through several Trust Funds covering projects addressing several pressing military safety issues (such as liquidation of land mines and, most recently, surplus ammunition) and implemented several projects under the Science for Peace and Security Programme, and Public Diplomacy grants.

The key subject in the Serbia-NATO dialogue has been Kosovo. Serbia's leaders have vowed never to recognise its independence. The NATO-led KFOR mission is responsible for Kosovo's security. On the basis of the UN Security Council Resolution no. 1244, KFOR is mandated to ensure a safe and secure environment, including freedom of movement to all people in Kosovo. In effect, it means that KFOR protects the ethnic Serb minority and religious places in the enclaves to the south of the Ibar River. On this basis, Belgrade and SAF have been developing constructive relations with KFOR, including simultaneous and coordinated patrols along the administrative border. On the other hand, Belgrade continues to view with suspicion KFOR's assistance in developing the Kosovo Security Force (KSF).

Serbia's involvement in PfP was put on hold in early 2008 as a reaction to Kosovo's declaration of independence, which was actively supported



by the United States and most (although not all) NATO members. It was resumed one year later. Serbia appointed its first Ambassador to NATO - Branislav Milinković, and opened its mission at the NATO HQ in Brussels in 2010. A few months later, the North Atlantic Council approved Serbia's request to develop its first Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) defining its defence reform goals and areas for intensified bilateral cooperation for the next two years. Under the IPAP, more political consultations and practical cooperation were to take place. Once adopted, the IPAP will upgrade the nature of existing cooperation from purely military to a political one.

In the 2011 - 2012 period, bilateral relations with NATO were gradually gaining momentum. The Serbian President Tadić, himself a former minister of defence (MoD), had been supportive of moving Serbia closer to NATO. At the same time, he was extremely careful and ambiguous about this issue in public, unwilling to challenge the official doctrine of military neutrality. His MoD Dragan Šutanovac was more outspoken in public, explaining that Serbia and NATO are not enemies anymore, but partners seeking the best models of cooperation [3]. At times, Šutanovac seemed frustrated with the lack of political mandate and unity within the government in terms of what Serbia really wants to achieve in its relations with NATO. By the end of his tenure, the Serbian Ministry of Defence was using the full toolbox of existing programmes developing a substantive track record of bilateral cooperation. In 2012 alone, 119 military and expert activities were implemented (out of 151 planned). At the same time, the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was careful to note that all of the activities were in line with Serbia's doctrine of military neutrality [4], while actively using diplomatic channels to develop the political side of this relationship (at lower levels of officials).

## RELUCTANCE TO DEVELOP POLITICAL DIALOGUE

This trajectory was interrupted by the change of governments in Belgrade. In May 2012, Serbian President Boris Tadić lost elections to the nationalist candidate Tomislav Nikolić. In parallel, his Democratic Party was replaced in the government by the Nikolić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which used to be openly critical about Serbia's cooperation with NATO and whose voter constituency is instinctively anti-NATO. Under its current leader, the powerful first Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, the SNS has been the backbone of the coalition government with the smaller Socialist Party, whose leader Ivica Dačić managed to secure the premiership. When the new government came to power in mid-2012, there was general expectation that quiet drive towards closer relations with NATO would go into reverse. That has clearly not happened. The biggest break-through has been on Kosovo. Under EU facilitation (and with tough conditionality on starting the EU accession talks), the Dačić government has made huge progress in political dialogue with Kosovo, and sought security guarantees from NATO for gradual integration of four Serb-dominated municipalities into Kosovo's legal system.

In the meantime, a more nuanced picture has emerged vis-à-vis NATO, with the following elements:

- There is now more reluctance in Belgrade to develop a political dialogue with the Alliance than two years ago. This was confirmed at the formal meeting between Serbian President Nikolić with NATO Secretary General Rasmussen on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2013. It mostly focused on KFOR and situation in Kosovo. As for bilateral cooperation, Secretary General Rasmussen underlined that NATO is ready

to expand practical military cooperation and political dialogue with Serbia step by step. In his press statement, President Nikolić hinted that Serbia is open to more cooperation but at the same time, it “would not like to choose sides” and prefers to keep political distance from the Alliance. [5]

- This has been accompanied by a clear shift in political rhetoric. Previous talk of moving towards a closer partnership with NATO in Belgrade is gone. For most of 2013, the Serbian government has focused on getting the green light to start the EU accession talks. Its leaders tried hard to explain the fulfilment of tough EU conditionality on Kosovo to the public as a necessary concession that will bring long-term benefits for Serbia, and save it from economic collapse. That is one more reason why Serbian leaders have been more careful to go against public sentiment in other sensitive foreign policy and security issues, including closer cooperation with NATO. President Nikolić, in particular, has repeatedly emphasised military neutrality as the key political guideline in relations with NATO. At the same time, however, Serbia has continued to develop its practical cooperation with the Alliance, albeit with less enthusiasm for political dialogue than before.
- Vučić (who until August 2013 also held the position of MoD) has been trying to balance developing cooperation with NATO by intensified political and military contacts with Russia, including in arms procurement. Earlier in 2013, Serbia became an observer at the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation. However, the current level of Serbia-NATO cooperation remains significantly greater than the level of military cooperation with Moscow. In November 2013, Vučić tried

hard to fend off concerns of the visiting Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, over continuous cooperation with NATO and assured him that Serbia's goal is not to join the Alliance [6].

- All programs of military-technical cooperation between Serbia and NATO are still moving ahead (up to 160 activities were planned for 2013), and even new ones are being started. In July 2013, a new Trust Fund led by the United Kingdom was launched to assist the SAF to liquidate decommissioned surplus ammunition [7]. It is being implemented in the Technical Overhaul Institute Kragujevac (KRZK). In parallel, the pace of security sector reforms at the Ministry of Defence is slowing down. But rather than a result of political decisions, it might well be just a side effect of two issues: the change of personnel and more limited financial resources on both sides. Cuts in defence cooperation programs of NATO member countries also played a role in slight reduction of new activities.

On the other hand, the IPAP – as the key guideline for bilateral cooperation – has yet to be finalised. It is important to note that the current Serbian government decided to submit its updated version to the North Atlantic Council last year. The new IPAP draft has been bouncing back and forth among involved government institutions in Belgrade, and between Serbia and NATO. Now it has reached the final stages of the formal approval procedure, set to be adopted in early 2014. The main areas of future Serbia - NATO cooperation have been envisaged as follows: political and security framework; defence and military issues; public diplomacy, scientific cooperation, crisis management and emergency planning system and the protection of classified information.



This leads to an impression that as NATO is interested to see a gradual build-up of strong relationship, the current Serbian leadership is divided over this issue. In particular, the SNS leadership has been reluctant to move beyond the status quo. As Serbian politics is wheeling up for snap parliamentary election in 2014, this year might bring not only formal advancement of the Serbia - NATO cooperation but perhaps also a more ambitious Minister of Defence allowed to come up with creative ideas about how to move this quiet partnership forward.

## CONCLUSIONS

- In 2014, NATO should encourage Belgrade to deliver on tangible short-term steps palatable to the public opinion and coalition parties constituencies, such as nominating a new Serbian ambassador to NATO (after the tragic death of Ambassador Milinković, his job has been vacant for more than a year). It is very likely that Serbia will first enter the EU (in 2020 at the earliest) and only then decide about its potential membership in NATO. However, in the meantime it will need to develop practical vision of how to use its relationship with NATO for strategic advancement of Serbia's role in international security and military missions out of Europe. Hopes are that the first IPAP might be approved and its implementation started in 2014.
- The new momentum in Serbia's cooperation with NATO could be generated by the EU accession talks, since it will also include the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) agenda. Relevant Serbian state institutions – the Ministry of Defence in particular – are already mapping what changes will be required. Practical needs for growing interoperability with the EU partners (while most of them are also in NATO) might result in a new push for modernisation of Serbian army as well as in a dramatic increase in Serbian military personnel participation in international peace-keeping operations under the EU or UN flag. Currently, Serbia is involved in number of UN missions as well as the EU's counter-piracy naval force operation *Atalanta* around Somalia and its medical team has been part of the EUTM training mission in Somalia.
- In Kosovo, the international security set-up might soon undergo major changes as the EULEX's mandate expires in June 2014, and its renewal by the Kosovo government is far from certain. As the security situation continues to improve, some NATO members advocate for an additional KFOR troop reductions and scaling down its duties to prepare for future withdrawal from Kosovo (under the so-called Gate 3 option). By mid-2014, 300 French soldiers will leave KFOR as decided by the French President Holland at the end of the last year. Serbia strongly rejects the Gate 3 option and would like to see KFOR troops remaining at the current levels even after the announced French withdrawal. If Pristina gets its way and the EULEX's role is set to diminish, it will be more difficult for some NATO members to argue for further KFOR troop reductions. Such development could strengthen political dialogue between Belgrade and NATO on Kosovo.
- In terms of public diplomacy, it is time for a new discourse with more realism "message constituency", and long-term approach. As shown during the recent "Partnership Tour" co-organised by the Slovak Atlantic Commission and the Atlantic Council of Serbia in towns across the country, more attention needs to be turned to the significance of NATO in providing security for the Serbian community in Kosovo, aid in reforming the Serbian Armed Forces,



and to the recent experience of the new NATO members. The Alliance is doing a lot of partnership activities in Serbia which make a real difference and help both Serbian Armed Forces as well as civilians. Serbia belongs to one of the most active NATO partners in *Building Integrity Initiative* aimed at fighting corruption in the defence sector as well as implementation of the UN SC Resolution No. 1325 on gender equality in armed forces. However, these activities are not publicised effectively in Serbia and very little is known about them outside of Belgrade. NATO as well as Serbia could do more in informing the public about their joint projects and activities.

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- 1) According to IPSOS data, only 13% of Serbian population supports the idea of Serbia joining NATO. It is mostly supported by young people under 30, and by men more than women. See more at: <http://www.bezbednost.org/BCSP-News/5212/SerbiaNATO-Time-is-Ripe-for-a-Change-in.shtml#sthash.Ue1MuPdv.dpuf>
- 2) Serbia is using the Operational Capabilities Concept (OCC) mechanism within the PfP, which offers tools for self-evaluation as well as teams of evaluators from NATO. Serbia has pre-declared the following units into the OCC: Motorised Infantry Company, Military Police Platoon and NBC Platoon. These units have already been certified through the 2nd Self-evaluation stage (June 2013), and expect to be certified for the highest level of preparedness (NEL 2) in September 2014. However, due to political limitations, Serbia is preparing these units for missions under the UN and EU mandates, without outlook for their deployment within NATO-led operations in the near future.
- 3) Tanjug, 5.2.2010. See: <http://english.blic.rs/News/5982/Sutanovac-NATO-not-enemy-any-more>
- 4) <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/security-issues/partnership-for-peace-programme>
- 5) B92, 27.9.2013. See: [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=09&dd=27&nav\\_id=87803](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2013&mm=09&dd=27&nav_id=87803)
- 6) [B92, 14.11.2013. See: http://www.b92.net/eng/news/comments.php?nav\\_id=88337](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/comments.php?nav_id=88337)
- 7) [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50100.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50100.htm) Note: Except for the NATO member countries also Partner nations (i.e. non-NATO members) have donated additional funds to the Trust fund for liquidation of the surplus ammunition (e.g. Switzerland 98.000 EUR, Ireland 80.000 EUR as of the end of November 2013).

**Milan Nič** is head of the Central Europe and South-East Europe Programmes at the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI). **Ján Cingel** is project manager of the Transfer of Know-How Programme of the Slovak Atlantic Commission (SAC).

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