

Hard Power and Its Objectives: US-Russia-China Competition in the Western Balkans

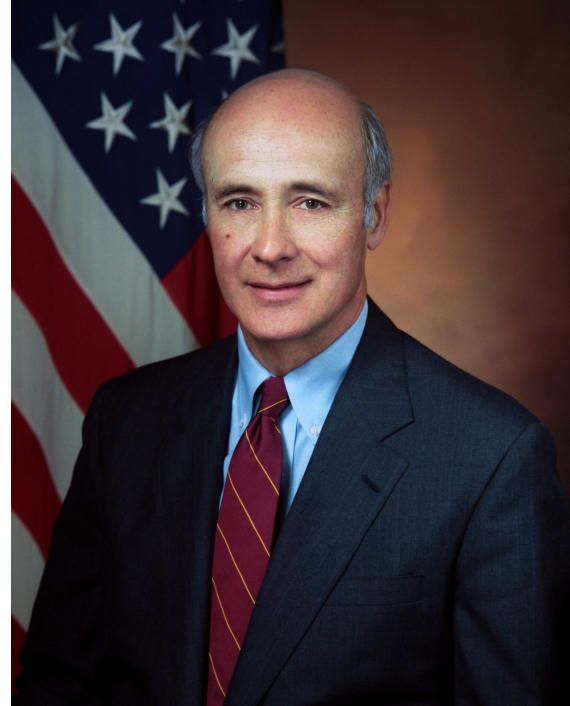
Bliss Perry

Overview

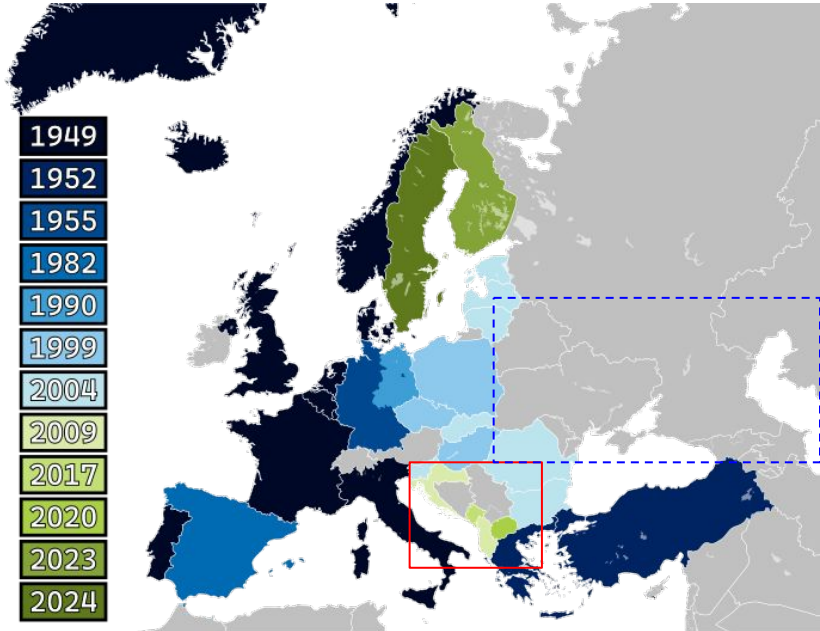
- Theory: Defining Hard Power
- Euro-Atlantic integration as an Arena of Strategic Contestation
- Regional Objectives + Tactics of External Actors
 - USA
 - Russia
 - China
- Conclusion
- Appendix: The Trump Card?

What is Hard Power?

- Distinction between **hard** and **soft** power made famous by the political scientist Joseph Nye
- Some definitions of “hard power”:
 - “the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will” (Nye, 2003)
 - Coercion as opposed to co-optation
- Encompasses both enticements and threats:
 - Military alliance / invasion
 - Free trade deal / sanctions
- Nye claims that foreign policy is most effective when it combines hard with soft power (“smart power”)
- **Best viewed as tools in pursuit of a strategic objective**



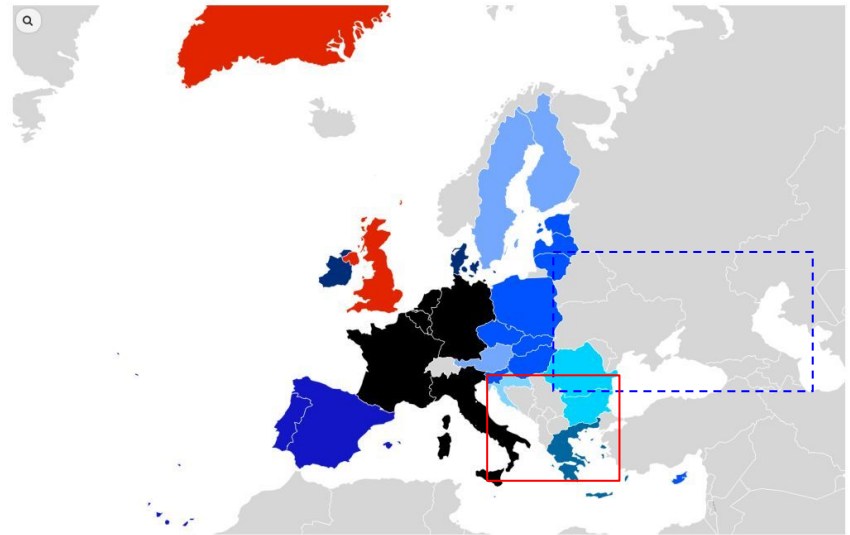
Western Balkans as an Strategic Vacuum in Europe



The map of EU enlargement history

When Member States joined the European Union

● Founder ● 1973 ● 1981 ● 1986 ● 1995 ● 2004 ● 2007 ● 2013 ● Withdrawn



Euro-Atlantic Integration as an Arena of Competition

- The Western Balkans remains one of two major zones of instability and competition in Europe (alongside the post-Soviet space)
- This volatility arises from the exclusion of much of the region from Euro-Atlantic strategic formations (EU/NATO)
- Integration to the West as “default” yet stalled regional trajectory
 - 2003 Thessaloniki Summit - “unequivocal support to the European perspective”
 - SAA Agreements with EU + negotiations opened
 - Yet.... EU candidate state “purgatory”
- Therefore, one can consider Euro-Atlantic integration the main object of geo-political contestation in the region, which informs the strategies of different foreign actors:
 - USA — **protect** Euro-Atlantic integration as its main hegemon (defensive, status quo)
 - Russia — **deny** Euro-Atlantic integration as its main opponent (offensive, chaos)
 - China — **create positive alternative to** Euro-Atlantic integration (neutral, new opportunities)

USA in the Western Balkans: The Reluctant Enforcer*

**This analysis refers to US policy before the second inauguration of Donald Trump, whose new developments will be covered in an appendix*

- Historically, the USA's main objective in the Western Balkans has been to neutralize volatility and defend **strategic stability** on favorable terms, i.e. through Euro-Atlantic integration
 - Not only strengthens Euro-Atlantic institutions but also unlocks the long-term goal of “Pivot to Asia” through reducing instability in Europe
- Euro-Atlantic integration as the “default” trajectory of the region -> implies a **defensive strategy** or defense of the status quo post-1990s
 - A defensive strategy is harder to execute since it carries the most surface area



USA in the Western Balkans: The Reluctant Enforcer*

Various efforts to promote its definition of stability:

- Peacekeeping Interventions:
 - Operation Deliberate Force (1995, Bosnia); SFOR (1996-2004)
 - Operation Allied Force (1999, Yugoslavia); KFOR
- Diplomatic Involvement:
 - Dayton Accords (1995)
 - Kosovo-Serbia economic normalization (2020)
- Support for Multilateral Forums
 - NATO expansion
 - Three Seas Initiative



In particular, we note a pattern of **US hard power as a “backstop”** to the ineffectiveness of various European efforts to resolve regional conflict (Bosnia) or diplomatic disputes (Serbia/Kosovo)

Multiple efforts to let the Europeans lead on Balkan policies (1990s wars; 2008—) have been met by US re-engagement, frustrating goal of pivoting away from the region

Russia in the Western Balkans: Chaos Agent

- Russia's main interest in the Western Balkans is to preserve its regional influence by **effectively denying Euro-Atlantic integration** in its backyard
 - Any NATO/EU expansion seen as undesirable
 - Instability in the Western Balkans distracts the West from the space of the former-USSR, an even more critical strategic region for Russia
- Hence, Russia pursues an **offensive** and **destabilizing** strategy against the "status quo" path of Euro-Atlantic integration
 - Easier to succeed given law of entropy and tendency towards instability
 - Enables **reliance on hybrid warfare** - not only state military and economic power but also espionage, disinformation, paramilitary groups, cyber crime, etc.
- Preservation of a security vacuum, instability, and chaos as a desirable state
 - Does not necessitate pursuit of its own proactive/positive regional vision (multilateral alternatives to NATO, EU, for example)



Russia in the Western Balkans: Chaos Agent

- Russia's actions vis-a-vis the Western Balkans generally follow the trajectory of its relations with the Euro-Atlantic bloc at large:
 - 1990s - cautious normalization with the West
 - Diplomatic involvement in 1992 London Peace Conference, Dayton Accords
 - Military participation in SFOR/KFOR
 - But... humiliation by unilateral NATO bombing of Serbia
 - 2000s - economic revitalization/interdependency
 - Gazprom acquires NIS in Serbia
 - Zarubezhneft buys Brod oil refinery in BiH
 - SouthStream effort (abandoned in 2014)
 - Loss-making businesses -> implies non-economic/political objectives
 - 2010s/2020s - increased subversion vis-a-vis West ("active measures")
 - Alleged GRU involvement in 2016 Montenegro coup attempt (ahead of 2017 NATO accession)
 - Russian disinformation campaign before 2018 North Macedonia naming referendum
 - Increased support for Milorad Dodik and Serb separatist movement in BiH
 - Diplomatic immunity request for "Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre" in Nis, Serbia
 - Wagner group recruitment in Serbia, Republika Srpska

China in the Western Balkans: Economic Opportunist

- Like Russia, China opposes US unipolar hegemony and seeks status as a great power in a multipolar world
 - However, China does not have proximity to (and historic sphere of influence in) the Western Balkans -> **less direct interest in stopping Euro-Atlantic integration** of the Western Balkans
- Therefore, China views the Western Balkans less as an arena for geopolitical competition with the West but rather as an **economic conduit to connect its commercial power in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to Europe**
 - Compared to US and Russia, more emphasis on economic levers of hard power rather than military/political
 - More positive vision: projection of economic power rather than security vacuum



China in the Western Balkans: Economic Opportunist

- The main lever of Chinese hard power involvement in the Western Balkans is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)
 - €32 billion invested the region in 2009-2021 (€10 billion in Serbia alone)
- Emphasis on transport corridors and infrastructure to connect periphery with core Europe
 - **Piraeus - Belgrade - Budapest corridor**, railway; connecting Chinese owned Piraeus with Central Europe as part of China-Europe Land-Sea Express Route
 - Bar - Boljare highway (connect Adriatic port in Montenegro with Serbia)
 - More highways in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Risk of debt-trap diplomacy (land confiscations, forced leases, military use)
- BRI regional policy illustrates China's example not to explicitly halt Euro-Atlantic integration in the region but rather establish the region as an **entrypoint to extend Chinese commercial power into Europe**
- BRI vision and European Integration not necessarily in opposition:
 - Belgrade could be an advocate for China within the EU (see Hungary)
 - Tighter integration with EU markets could increase China's access to the EU through its footholds in Western Balkans



Conclusion

- We observe that Euro-Atlantic integration remains the main arena of strategic in the Western Balkans:
 - US defending the “status quo” trajectory, Russia attempting to deny it, China attempting to provide an alternative
- Easier to attack status quo than defend it (advantage to Russia, China)
- Result: **Russian/Chinese hard power seeing greater returns given that Western Balkans EU accession remains effectively stalled:**
 - Russian political involvement - diplomatic cover for Serbia’s intransigence on Kosovo, interference on behalf of Dodik in BiH
 - Lack of alignment of Serbia’s foreign policy with the EU re: Russia, China
 - Opportunities for corruption through untransparent foreign investment
- Russian and Chinese visions different but mutually strengthening:
 - Russian denial of Euro-Atlantic integration in the area facilitates pivot to China for alternative, lucrative economic opportunities, which in turn further weakens the appeal of solidly siding 100% with the West

Appendix: The Trump Card?

- Pivot of US foreign policy away from traditional unipolarity as Euro-Atlantic hegemon, towards transactional dealmaking in multipolar world (“Yalta 2.0”)
 - Re-orient strategic contest in Western Balkans away from Euro-Atlantic integration in favor of ad hoc bilateral relations: competing with Russia/China at their own game
- Early indicators:
 - Different position from EU on territorial swaps (1st Trump admin)
 - Overtures to Serbia (Don Jr. visit), criticism of Kosovo government under PM Kurti
 - Kushner/Grenell investments in Serbia, Albania
- Potential Winners: Serbia, nationalist forces (e.g. Dodik) - can “play all sides” and leverage ambiguity
- Potential Losers: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo (stabilized due to multilateralism enforced by Euro-Atlantic hegemony; potential collateral damage to nationalism or great power dealmaking)



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