

A New Strategic Framework for US-Serbian Relations

A Rare Window of Opportunity Opens for the US in the Balkans

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The new Trifunović Plan¹ to provide the basis of a resolution of the long-festering question of the future of Kosovo — and therefore of Serbia and Albania — possibly cannot gain traction without the active support and efforts of the United States. It is one of the few areas in the current global framework which is uniquely suited to the arbitration skills of the US, because of Washington's rôle during the past three decades in the region, and therefore offers a positive opportunity for the US Administration of US Pres. Donald Trump.

As a prelude to studying this opportunity, it is fair to say that 95 percent of the history of US-Serbian relations over the past 150 years — to the extent they were active at all — was marked by warmth, cooperation, and shared values. And, as is mostly the way in asymmetric relationships, when one power is strategically more powerful than the other, the junior partner gives disproportionately to the senior in terms of blood and loyalty.

The junior partner is highly conscious of the senior, but the senior usually shows little understanding and appreciation of the junior.

¹ Described below.

This is not atypical in the history of strategic relationships and alliances.²

It is because of that failure by the US to understand and appreciate Serbia that a decade of the past 150 years of their relationship was marred by actions which profoundly damaged the strategic welfare of both states. Washington, in particular, is now paying a heavy price for that misunderstanding. It did not help that for 45 years of that relationship Serbia was virtually forgotten by the US in the period when Serbia was obscured within a communist Yugoslavia Socialist Federal Republic. Arguably it was also forgotten by the US as a separate entity as well during the years of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1918 until World War II. So any understandings of mutual warmth and Serbian support for the US also slipped into obscurity in the minds of the US politicians and public.

Arguably, the creation of the Yugoslav federation in 1918 was the worst thing that could have happened to US-Serbian relations, because the very name of Serbia was subordinated or forgotten in the US. But the final 45-year communist period as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was the worst of the worst for the US-Serbian relationship.

Forgotten was the fact that Serbia had earlier provided a significant portion of its population to the United States at critical times in the history of both countries. Serbia's great scientist, Nikola Tesla³, disproportionately contributed to setting the US on its path toward the modern era — the era of electricity and electronics — in a way which was pivotal to the urbanization and scientific progress of the US. Tesla was a decisive, disruptive figure who, more than almost anyone else, put

² See, Copley, Gregory R.: Chapter 19, "Loyalty and Survival", in *The Art of Victory*. New York, 2006: Simon & Schuster Threshold Editions. The maxim reads: "Mutual loyalty exists only between equals. In all other instances, loyalty flows only in any durable form from the weaker to the more powerful."

³ Tesla, Nikola; b. July 10, 1856, in Tecna (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire); died January 7, 1943. He emigrated to the US in 1884.

the US into economic, social, and scientific efficiency, enabling the US to emerge as the world's most powerful economy. Tesla's contributions outweighed many others.

But what would have happened if Tesla had been able to evolve his genius in Serbia rather than the US? Would the Serbian culture of that time have nurtured his abilities and actions in the way that the US environment did? But regardless of any such speculation, Tesla was a gift to the US in the same way that countless other Serbs contributed enormously to the industrial and fighting strength of the US, including their participation in the aerospace industry and particularly the *Apollo* space program. Or that Serbian-Americans as a group won the greatest number of the highest US award for valor: the Congressional Medal of Honor. This is all basic knowledge to the Serbian people, even if it is less known and appreciated in the US.

Indeed, the very fact that this contribution was less known and less appreciated in the US is what allowed the rupture in US-Serbian relations to occur at the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Yugoslav state which contained Serbia. It was the near-total ignorance in the US polity toward Serbia in 1990-91 which allowed US Pres. William Clinton (1993-2001), for reasons which had more to do with his own views and domestic political challenges than because of US strategic interests, to intervene in the affairs of the Balkans in a way which profoundly damaged the strategic wellbeing of Serbia.⁴ Much of that damage has yet to be rectified.

⁴ See, for example, Copley, Gregory R.: "The New Rome & The New Religious Wars", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, March 1999. The report gave some of the background to the US interventions against Serbia and Serbs. It also cited the remark in the 11-12/1992 edition of *Strategic Policy* in which this author also noted: "Incoming President Clinton will be tempted to take fast, populist decisions on the Balkans crisis, and these could be fatal for any chances for peace there. ... Bill Clinton campaigned for the US Presidency without

And even following that period — after, say, the 1990-2019 timeframe, a three-decade era — the US remains largely ignorant of the history of Serbian support for the US and the West; it remains largely ignorant of the strategic importance, geopolitically, of Serbia in the heartland of South-Eastern Europe; and it remains totally ignorant of the historical and recent underpinnings of the war in which Washington became implacably opposed to its onetime Serbian ally.

In other words, the critical elements of the US-Serbian relationship have *still* not been addressed adequately by the US. And Serbia itself has not acted comprehensively to correct this situation. Nonetheless, because the US now finds itself strategically challenged globally, it is prepared to look Serbia in the eye to at least some degree. The US is in significant competition with other powers to retain influence in Western Europe, South-Eastern Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean. And Washington is now somewhat more humbled than when it began its offensive against Serbia in the 1990s. That is not to say that the US yet comprehends South-Eastern Europe at the priority level it merits, but — particularly with the collapse of US-Turkish relations and the substantial rise in Russian and Peoples Republic of China regional engagement — Washington now sees a need to restructure its capabilities in the broader Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean.

What is perhaps one of the few fortunate openings for Washington in recent years is that events have conspired in the Eastern Mediterranean to open a new strategic opportunity for the United States, essentially allowing it to fill the vacuum caused by the loss of Turkish allegiance and the rise of Russian, PRC, and Iranian influence.

touching on strategic issues. Now he must learn to lead the US through the most dangerous global morass for perhaps 70 years.”

Turkey, by moving further toward Russia as well as making its own bid to revive the Ottoman sphere of influence and a new pan-Turkism, has forced the US to consider strengthening its strategic and military relationship with other, long-neglected allies in the region. Washington has already begun rebuilding military-political ties with Greece — particularly with the election of the New Democracy Government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis — and Cyprus, and has begun to rebuild a relationship with Serbia. Washington has supported the trilateral Israel-Cyprus-Greece economic and military relationship, and encouraged its expansion to include Egypt in some aspects because of overlapping energy exploitation interests. And it is no coincidence that the Serbian-Israeli links have deepened over recent years.

Washington, indeed, has little choice but to revisit the region and to consider new relationships.

Serbia had been a great historical ally of the US, and then had become merely a curiosity for it during the communist 45-plus years of Socialist Yugoslavia. And because of that interregnum and isolation from US thinking, Serbia was, even after the fall of communism, abandoned by the US in the break-up of Yugoslavia and the war which followed in the 1990s. The US Clinton Administration delivered unspeakable insults to its old ally by ensuring the erosion of its rights and its territory in the Dayton Accords of 1995, which cut the territory of the Bosnian Serbs by half; the Rambouillet “agreement” which was unilaterally thrust on Yugoslavia in 1999 (with Yugoslavia’s rejection of it being the basis for NATO to start the war against Serbia), and then in carving out of Serbia’s heartland in 2008 a new, artificial “nation”, based on a population of illegal Albanian immigrants: Kosovo.

And yet today Kosovo offers the US no real benefits, but only innumerable ongoing problems. Even the US base in Kosovo, Camp Bondsteel, has little strategic purpose, and which, despite the huge cost to the US taxpayer, now houses only around 1,400 US National Guard troops.

Kosovo's sovereignty has not been universally recognized, especially by Serbia, as the US had hoped, and even Kosovo's initial recognition by many states has been regretted by governments which originally recognized Kosovo merely as an act of support to the US. Some governments have gone to the extreme length of withdrawing recognition. This has led to the point where today the governments of Albania and Kosovo have begun the creation of joint diplomatic legations internationally, so that Kosovo could, in essence, "piggyback" on Albania's more ready acceptance as a sovereign nation-state.⁵

In this lies the seed of a solution for all parties.

At the same time, we have seen Serbian Pres. Aleksandar Vučić substantially step up the search for a creative solution to the Kosovo problem.

Serbia, despite being weakened by the results of the war of the 1990s, remains a critical and stable hub of South-Eastern Europe, as witnessed by the campaign by Russia to build its influence with Belgrade. Can Russia have Turkey *and* the Balkans both? Would this provoke the US and EU too far?

And can Turkey, after its past several years of escalating hostility toward the US, expect to be rewarded with revived dominance over the Balkan states?

⁵ Kosovo and Albania on July 3, 2019, signed an agreement on unifying and coordinating their foreign policies, which would include joint embassies. As the website, *Balkan Insight* reported (by author Blerta Begisholli, from Priština), Kosovo Foreign Minister Behgjet Pacolli said: "This is a big step ahead to come together in front of the world and act as a [single] nation," he continued, referring to the fact that both Balkan countries are mainly ethnic Albanian. Albanian Foreign Minister Cakaj said he felt honored to conclude such an agreement. "It opens new horizons for joint institutional action as we move ever closer towards deep national integration," Cakaj wrote on Twitter.

In all this, what are some of the key factors which lead to a strategic opening for the US, Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo, as well as providing a solution which would substantially ease the challenge of the Balkans for the European Union and NATO, and key regional states such as Greece?

- **Turkey's Alliance with Russia:** Turkey, which sees itself as the key benefactor of Islam and as traditional overlord of the Balkans, has now created a *de facto* alliance of necessity with Russia. This is inimical to US, EU, and NATO interests, and particularly to the interests of Greece;
- **Turkey's Alliance with Iran:** The Turkish Government in 2019 created an express and explicit alliance with Iran to challenge US and Western interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. Iran has been, with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and others, a principal driver in the use of the Balkans as a hub of Islamist-*jihadi* activities.
- **The Kosovo Problem:** The existence of a separate state of Kosovo has emerged as a problem for the US, a disaster for Serbia, and what is now emerging as an unrealizable dream for Albania. It has also emerged as a reality which cannot be resolved by merely attempting to force Serbia to accept the loss of lands which have the deepest and most iconic sense of centrality to Serbia's national saga of identity. How do all parties to the dilemma, including Russia (if it wishes to retain any of its historical friendship and leverage with Serbia), proceed toward resolution?

In July 2019, Serbian professor Dr Darko Trifunović proposed a formula which could circumvent the need for Serbia to formally recognize Kosovo, but which could still provide both the Albanian Government and Kosovo Albanians with a unique opportunity to create a far more important geopolitical entity. At the

same time, the move would substantially and positively impact the stability and strategic viability of Serbia while limiting the construction of a landbridge of Islamist activity of the type favored by Turkey and Iran into the heart of Europe.

Dr Trifunović, who heads the Institute for National and International Security (INIS) in Belgrade, and who is a Senior Fellow of the International Strategic Studies Association, publisher of the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* reports, on July 27, 2019, proposed a framework of territorial exchanges.

These exchanges, the basis of a normalization between Serbia and Albania, would see the northern, ethnically Serbian, area of Kosovo returned to Serbian control and a corridor of traditionally Serbian-populated Western Albania handed to Serbia to give it back its access to the Adriatic sea, in exchange for an acceptance of the merger of the Kosovo “state” into Albania, substantially expanding the geography of a “greater Albanian” state.

The area of Northern Albania ceded would be the traditionally Serbian lands, including, for example, the historical medieval Serbian city of Skadar, and its region, now called Shkoder. Albania would receive the Kosovo region south of the Ibar River.⁶

⁶ Prof. Trifunović was quoted in the Serbian news site, www.alo.rs, on July 27, 2019, as saying: “This is our opportunity. A fair proposal should be made to [US Pres. Donald] Trump because he is pragmatic. The proposal would consist in the fact that we should have a dialogue directly with Tiranë and not with Priština. How could we talk to someone suspected of war crimes (such as [Kosovo Pres. and Kosovo Liberation Army founder/leader Hashim] Thaçi, [Kosovo Liberation Army leader] Kadri Veseli, and [Kosovo Liberation Army leader Ramush] Haradinaj ... The proposal is that Serbia would exchange territories with Albania; that is, in exchange for what is south of [the] Ibar [river], Serbia would receive the Shkoder region with [the ancient Serbian city of] Shkodra [Skadar]. Serbs in enclaves should receive the maximum protection [as is] enjoyed by Albanians in Serbia, and the same should apply to monasteries.” Asked if he feared whether individuals would accuse him of making the “Greater Albania” through such a land exchange, he replied: “How do I make a Greater Albania when I advocate that Serbia go out to sea? It is a fair proposal and a compromise and so everyone would get something and everyone would lose something. And then we would not have to recognize Kosovo. We should deliver this proposal to [Pres.] Trump as soon as possible, and we can do it through our friends in Israel. I am convinced that the US President would support this proposal. Any party which rejected the resolution would have America on its back and would then be pressured by sanctions. Such a solution can in no way affect Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH),

Such an internationally-accepted enlarged Albania would resolve the issue for Albania and the Kosovo authorities of legitimizing the combined entity internationally.

This would provide Tiranë with the greatest Albanian strategic advance in centuries (while perhaps still not fully sating the craving for a “Greater Albania” which seeks parts of Northern Macedonia and even Montenegro), but would also re-establish Serbian stability and prosperity to help guard the South-Eastern European framework of logistics, via the Danube-Sava rivers, and down to the Adriatic/Mediterranean.

There is no question that many Albanians and many Serbs will argue that such an exchange does not satisfy deep-seated historical quests, or restore iconic national heartlands (for Serbia), but such a gesture would be a strategic win-win for Serbia and the Albanians (of Albania and the Albanian diaspora in Kosovo). And it would resolve fundamental issues for Europe (not just the European Union), and the US.

Quite apart from current and projected geopolitical realities, the US has a particular historical engagement which it needs to consider: the commitment of the US by Pres. Woodrow Wilson, on January 6, 1918; the 14-point “Program for the Peace of the World”.

This was at the heart of Prof. Trifunović’s proposal insofar as engagement of US good offices toward the resolution of the Kosovo dispute was concerned. Wilson fully recognized the uniquely heavy burden which Serbia shouldered in opposing the Triple Alliance powers around Germany in World War I, losing the largest

which was made on the basis of the Dayton Agreement, because the proposed understanding with Albania would be a mutual exchange of territories.”

number of its troops and civilians of any combatant power in the war. He ordered the Serbian flag to be flown over the White House as an unprecedented mark of respect.

Point XI of the 14 Points notes: “Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated [by foreign forces]; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea ...”

The longer the Kosovo problem degrades, from the US perspective, the more difficult it becomes for the sole US base in the Balkans, Camp Bondsteel, in Kosovo, to retain its utility. A resolution of the Kosovo situation in which Serbia recognizes an enlarged Albania which would include most of what is now Kosovo enhances the security and strategic viability of all. Greece, though remaining cautious of Albanian intentions toward both Greece and Northern Macedonia, could be expected, too, to support the outcome.

Prof. Trifunović noted: “A fair proposal should be made to [US Pres. Donald] Trump because he is pragmatic. The proposal would consist in the fact that we should have a dialogue directly with Tiranë and not with Priština.”

A win-win-win situation for Albania, Serbia, and the US would also, in fact, provide tangible benefits for the European Union, strengthening the stability of its south-eastern extremities at a time when the most vulnerable EU border with the east is with Turkey. This is particularly significant at a time when Turkey may once again prove to be a volatile element, possibly stimulating a resurgence in refugee and migrant flows from the Middle East into Europe.

As well, in June 2019, Kosovo Pres. Hashim Thaci started a new discourse about Kosovo joining Albania, after his former call for “border corrections” between Kosovo and Serbia failed to get traction. Clearly, with Kosovo ready to talk

“border adjustments”, and Kosovo and Albania discussing the merger of their states in some respects, the time is right for all parties to come to the table with a constructive plan.⁷ Clearly, the viability of Kosovo lies in being part of its fellow Albanian state, Albania, even if some in Tiranë might be concerned that the aggressive KLA-based leadership could take a disproportionate share of power in a united state.

Would the Trifunović Plan — which could be good for Serbia, Albania, Kosovo, and the US — necessarily be seen as a negative strategic proposition for Russia or the People’s Republic of China (PRC)? No, not necessarily. Indeed, given Belgrade’s historically open relationships with Moscow and Beijing, it could well be that the improved strategic viability of Serbia (and Albania) resulting from the accommodation would also be seen as favorable for Russia and the PRC.

What is significant is that although Russia currently benefits from the dynamic of the new Russia-Turkey relationship, and while the PRC might be open to dealings with Turkey, the reality is that both Russia and the PRC are anxious to see a reduction in Turkey’s flirtation with *jihadist*, Islamist, and pan-Turkist or Ottomanish terrorism and with its political interventions into the Caucasus (in the case of Russia) and Xinjiang (in the case of the PRC). Indeed, Moscow and Beijing are happy to have improved ties with Turkey — for separate strategic realities — but equally each wishes to see Turkish Pres. Reçep Tayyip Erdoğan constrained.

Neither Russia nor the PRC wish to see Erdoğan’s ambitions fulfilled to revive Turkish influence in the Persian Gulf, Arabian Peninsula, or Red Sea/Horn of Africa regions. That would potentially disrupt the nascent pax-Russo-Sinica which

⁷ As well, on July 2, 2019, Hashim Thaci noted: “New circumstances are being created, and the best solution would be that two parliaments, of Kosovo and Albania, approve the statements of the people’s wish to live in a single state.”

is replacing Western influence in that part of the Middle East.⁸ Russia and the PRC each clearly see the inalienable linkage between the Middle East — including the Red Sea/Suez sea lane (SLOC) — and the Eastern Mediterranean. And the Eastern Mediterranean's inherent linkage with the Balkans.

But there is little doubt that both Russia and the PRC would wish to see any short-term US advantage in the Balkans remain just that: short-term.

In the meantime, Serbia is in a position to act as a neutral and increasingly influential center for the consolidation and mediation of issues within the Eastern Orthodox Christian communities, given the recent polarization caused by the creation of autocephaly by some of the Orthodox community in Ukraine, at the expense of Russia. And now, once again, Orthodoxy is playing a significant rôle in the outcomes in the Red Sea as the end occurs of some 45 years of communist secularism in Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The linkages between Orthodox Christian societies is, in the case of Serbia and Ethiopia, paralleled by the historical linkage between Serbia and Ethiopia during the Yugoslav Tito years and the era of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. If the Middle East-Mediterranean linkage is critical to the strategic thinking of Russia and the PRC, then the iconic rôle of Serbia as a player in this — thanks to Tito, Haile Selassie, and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) — is relevant today.⁹

Indeed, though the Non-Aligned Movement is now departed, the rôle of Belgrade as a bridge or a space between the Eastern and Western powers has re-

⁸ See, particularly, Bodansky, Yossef: "The Dawn of the Chinese Gulf: Saudi Arabia and the UAE move away from the US as Iran cements its ties with Beijing and Moscow", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, August 12, 2019.

⁹ See, Copley, Gregory R., et al: *Rise of the RedMed : How the Mediterranean-Red Sea Nexus is Resuming its Strategic Centrality*. Alexandria, Virginia, 2016: the International Strategic Studies Association and the Gusau Institute.

mained, and this makes Serbia, once again, the “neural ground” which can provide an acceptable buffer between the PRC-Russia *bloc* and the West.

So in some senses, post-Soviet Russia has for some time had a view of Russian-Serbian relations while the US has not had a commensurate view of US-Serbian relations. But the US has begun to awaken to the need for a cohesive policy toward Serbia. The visit to Serbia in July 2019 of a US State Department-sponsored public diplomacy mission by aerospace veteran (and Serbian-American) David Vuich, to pay tribute to the rôle of Serbian Americans in the *Apollo* space program, was a hesitant start to this revival.

It is yet to become apparent whether or not the US Trump Administration, or, indeed, the inertia-dominated bureaucracies of the State Department and the Defense Department, comprehend the need to see Serbia as a centerpiece for a new US Balkan strategy to counterbalance the “loss” of Turkey.

But it is clear that the Trifunović Opportunity gives great impetus and urgency to Washington to seize an opportunity to find a rare and important strategic victory at a critical time in history. It would not only start to correct some of the damage the US committed in the Balkans in the 1990s, it might also provide a significant and positive foreign policy action which could impact the November 2020 US elections.

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tion, and national planning. His latest book (2018) is *Sovereignty in the 21st Century and the Crisis for Identity, Cultures, Nation-States, and Civilizations*. His 2006 book, *The Art of Victory*, was translated into Serbian as *Umetnost Pobede* by Studije Bezbednosti. He also wrote the acclaimed 2012 book, *UnCivilization: Urban Geopolitics in a Time of Chaos*. He has been decorated by numerous governments and institutions and was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2007. He is also President of the ISSA's Zahedi Center for the Study of Monarchy, Traditional Governance, and Sovereignty, and ISSA's Balkan and Eastern Mediterranean Policy Center.