



HOW DOES THE SERBIAN SECURITY DOCTRINE VIEW KOSOVO, THE WEST, RUSSIA, AND CHINA?

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Mentor Vrajolli and Jeta Loshaj

Executive Summary

This paper analyzes Serbia's security doctrine as outlined in its National Security Strategy (2021), focusing on how it perceives Kosovo, the West (EU, NATO, and the US), Russia, and China. Serbia's security posture is shaped by a balancing act—engaging both the West (EU, U.S., NATO) security structures while at the same time maintaining strong strategic relations with Russia and China. Despite its proclaimed military neutrality, Serbia's security doctrine reflects an aggressive posture toward Kosovo, a skeptical stance on the West, and a deepening strategic alignment with Moscow and Beijing.

The strategy frames Kosovo's independence as a direct challenge to Serbia's territorial integrity and national security. Serbia's security apparatus is engaged in diplomatic efforts, intelligence operations, and hybrid warfare to undermine Kosovo's sovereignty and prevent its international recognition.

While Serbia rejects NATO membership, it cooperates with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (PfP). Serbia maintains strong defense and energy ties with Russia, benefiting from diplomatic backing on Kosovo while avoiding Western sanctions on Moscow. China is emerging as a key economic and security partner, providing investments in infrastructure, digital surveillance, and military technology.

Serbia has significantly expanded its military capabilities, acquiring weapons from Russia and China while participating in joint drills with both NATO and CSTO. The adoption of the Total Defense concept—mobilizing the entire population and resources for national security—raises concerns about escalation and arms races in the Western Balkans.

Serbia's strategy frames Western influence as a security challenge, particularly regarding media, civil society, and foreign-backed democratization efforts. The West is seen as a hybrid threat, accused of interfering in Serbia's internal affairs, while Russia and China are portrayed as strategic allies.

Serbia's approach contributes to a geopolitical divide in the Western Balkans, where Kosovo is aligned fully with the West, while Serbia hedges between the EU and authoritarian states, as well as grappling internally with authoritarian practices. Serbia's influence campaigns portray Kosovo as a source of instability, using disinformation, cyber-attacks, and lobbying efforts to stall Kosovo's state-consolidation process as well as EU and NATO aspirations. Kosovo's reactive foreign policy and languishing partnership with the U.S., and the EU create an enabling environment for Serbia's efforts against Kosovo's statehood.

Introduction

The security strategies of Kosovo (2022–2027) and Serbia (2021) reveal two fundamentally opposing security doctrines, that are shaped by the legacies of the war of the 1990s, geopolitical orientations, and threat perceptions. While Kosovo's security strategy is deeply rooted in Euro-Atlantic integration, prioritizing NATO membership and EU accession, Serbia's security strategy adheres to military neutrality – at least on paper – following a delicate balancing act between the West on one hand and Russia, and China on the other. However, such a balancing act often seems more about maintaining close ties with China and Russia while balancing the West.

Both Kosovo and Serbia view each other as primary security threat, albeit in different ways. From Kosovo's perspective, Serbia is preparing or is prepared to attack Kosovo physically. In other words, Serbian security doctrine represents an aggression intent towards Kosovo or at least part of it. Such perceptions were very close to become a reality in 2023, following the Banjska terrorist attack in September of that year. US National Security Council had to publicly denounce Serbian military build-up at the border with Kosovo. A tactic followed with Russia prior to the invasion of Ukraine.

From the perspective of Serbia's current ruling elite—some of whom served under the notorious Milosevic regime responsible for ethnic cleansing and war crimes—Kosovo's independence still represents a challenge to "Serbia's sovereignty". Consequently, Serbian security doctrine emphasizes "restoring" that sovereignty, which implicitly keeps the option of military intervention on the table a mindset vividly reflected in the graffiti found throughout Serbia proclaiming "Kad se vojska na Kosovo vrati" ("When the army returns to Kosovo"). Such statements reflect a belief that physical control over Kosovo should one day be reestablished through military intervention. In contrast, while Kosovo focuses on developing self-defense capabilities, Serbia emphasizes offensive capacities and resists alignment with international blocs, implicitly keeping the option of military intervention on the table. Serbia has robust military industrial complex, and some of the world most wanted arms dealers reside in Serbia.¹

Based on analysis of official Kosovo and Serbian security documents (e.g., national security strategies), complemented by secondary sources, such as journal articles or reports from think-tanks in the region, this paper seeks to understand how Serbian security doctrine views Kosovo, West (EU, NATO and US), Russia and China. Additionally, this paper analyzes what Serbian security doctrine means for Kosovo and the core differences between Kosovo and Serbian security strategies. By examining these aspects, the analysis seeks to raise awareness among the Kosovar public but also other security actors, of an increasingly security-centered policy making process in Serbia, that can pose serious challenges to regional security and stability.

ACCORDINGLY, THERE ARE SIX MAJOR TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS ANALYSIS:

- 1. Kosovo is Fully Committed to NATO and EU Integration, While Serbia Maintains Military Neutrality as Smokescreen.** Kosovo's security strategy explicitly prioritizes NATO membership, and sees the Alliance as the ultimate security guarantor for the country. Often, membership in NATO is promoted as more important than in the EU for the Kosovo, by its political leadership. Serbia's strategy emphasizes military neutrality, rejecting NATO membership (but cooperating in the framework of Partnership for Peace), while maintaining military cooperation with Russia and CSTO states. Serbia has also purchased military equipment from China. Accordingly, so-called military neutrality is a smokescreen that Serbia uses to counter international pressure for alignment, but in reality it has increasingly invested in growing its military capabilities.
- 2. Serbia and Kosovo Perceive Each Other as Primary Security Threats.** Kosovo identifies Serbia's territorial claims, hybrid warfare, and

1. Sasa Dragojlo and Aleksandar Djordjevic, "Bangs for Bucks:

Serbian Arms Dealer Makes Mockery of US Sanctions – Again", BIRN, August 8, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/08/bangs-for-bucks-serbian-arms-dealer-makes-mockery-of-us-sanctions-again/>

military buildup as the most significant external threats to its security. Serbia has utilized intelligence activities, and support for parallel structures in northern Kosovo as key destabilizing factors. Serbia's strategy views Kosovo's independence and international recognition as a direct security challenge, framing Kosovo as a "separatist entity that threatens Serbia's sovereignty".

3. Serbia Engages with NATO, Russia, and China While Kosovo is Exclusively Aligned with the West.

Kosovo's security policy is entirely Western-oriented, reinforcing its strategic partnership with the U.S. and NATO members. It views Russia as a destabilizing actor in the Balkans, particularly due to its influence over Serbia. Serbia maintains an ambiguous security posture, engaging in military drills and defense cooperation with NATO, while simultaneously deepening military and strategic ties with Russia and China. It benefits from both Western security partnerships and Russian-Chinese support, maintaining strategic flexibility in foreign policy.

4. Serbia is Strengthening Military Capabilities, While Kosovo Focuses on NATO-Standard Defense Modernization.

Kosovo is in the process of transforming the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a full-fledged military, with the goal of achieving NATO compatibility. The Kosovo security strategy highlights defense modernization, intelligence capacity-building, and cybersecurity development. Serbia has significantly expanded its military

capabilities, purchasing weapons from Russia, China, and Western states. While officially neutral, Serbia's military expansion suggests a desire to project regional power and deter Kosovo's armed forces from becoming fully operational.

5. Kosovo Sees Hybrid Threats coming from Serbia and Russia, While Serbia Frames Western Influence (EU, US and NATO) as a Security Threat.

Kosovo identifies hybrid warfare—including cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and intelligence operations—as major security threats. Kosovo security strategy highlights Serbia's and Russia's role in spreading anti-Kosovo narratives and attempting to disrupt Kosovo's international integration efforts. Serbia's security strategy presents foreign interference—particularly from Western countries—as a security threat, framing NATO's role in Kosovo and Western-backed democratization efforts as potential threats to its sovereignty.

6. Regional Stability is Dependent on the Kosovo-Serbia Security Divide.

The opposing security strategies reinforce geopolitical tensions, complicating efforts for normalization and long-term regional stability. While Kosovo aligns fully with the West, Serbia's dual-engagement policy (cooperating with both NATO and Russia) ensures that its foreign policy remains unpredictable. The ongoing military buildup in Serbia and Kosovo's NATO aspirations create an environment where security policies are not just national concerns but regional flashpoints.

An Overview of Serbia's Security Doctrine

Security doctrine articulates strategic principles of a country, outlining how it perceives and addresses threats, engages with allies and adversaries, and ensures or secures its vital interests. It serves as a reference point for decision-makers, guiding defense policies, threat assessments, and foreign engagement and cooperation. In Serbia's case, this doctrine reflects largely an unaltered security perspective from the 1990s, which is centered on two key pillars: expansionism (in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo), and exceptionalism (Western Balkans dominance). Although the National Security Strategy (2021) underpins Serbia's declared military neutrality, it also promotes a highly skeptical tone towards the West while a very friendly tone towards Russia and China.

Serbia has recently moved towards embracing a security strategy it calls "Total Defense". Serbia's total defense doctrine is rooted in the broader concept that smaller, neutral, or non-aligned states have used to deter aggression by preparing their entire society—civilian and military alike—for potential conflict. Milosavljević and Štrbac, explain this as the "all human, material, and moral capabilities" being integrated into the national defense. This approach, from Kosovo's perspective, is also reminiscent of the Milosevic approach to security in the 1990s. Indeed, 'historical heritage' is set as one of the reasons for the development of the Total Defense Concept, and the paramilitary formations are implicitly treated as an instrument of defense in Serbia.² However, while Serbia's National Security Strategy briefly references total defense, it has not concretely determined how to adapt or implement these ideas. The strategic documentation remains vague about which model of total defense Serbia would adopt and how various tasks might be shared among the Armed Forces and civilian authorities.

Total defense strategy from Serbia can lead to security dilemmas and arms race in the region and therefore should be seen with great security concern on the part of not only Kosovo, but also NATO and the EU. From Kosovo's perspective, the current ruling political elite in Serbia is overwhelmingly nationalist, with many of its key figures having served under the Milosevic

regime (i.e., President Vucic, Minister of Interior Dacic, etc)—responsible for the ethnic cleansing and other types of war crimes of the 1990s. Despite extensive evidence this establishment continues to deny the atrocities committed by Serb forces during those wars (i.e., Srebrenica Genocide³; Reçak/Racak Massacre⁴). Without some level of acknowledgement of the war crimes and deal with the past, nationalist ideals, of "Serbian World"⁵ risk becoming increasingly integrated in security policies and state strategies of the Serbian state.

A key question in Serbia's total defense discourse is whether conscription is necessary or desirable. Historically, total defense frameworks around the world have often hinged on widespread military service. For instance, Israel maintains large reserve forces ready to mobilize on short notice. Serbia, by contrast, abolished general conscription in 2010. Now, there is debate over whether a return to compulsory service would strengthen societal resilience or merely revive old political tensions. What could tilt the debate in Serbia in one or another way, is the proclaimed objective of the Kosovo government to also introduce military conscription in Kosovo. But, also if Serbia, introduces military conscription or total defense a total defense framework, Kosovo, but even NATO or EU may interpret this as threatening posturing.

Serbia's Neutrality and Strategic Partnerships are a Balancing Act.

While Serbia formally proclaims military neutrality, the extent and nature of its strategic partnerships suggest a more nuanced position. Belgrade maintains cooperation with NATO via the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, conducting joint exercises and consultations that resemble those of states actively

3. UN, "The genocide in Srebrenica", <https://www.un.org/en/observances/srebrenica-genocide-commemoration-day>

4. HRW, "Yugoslav Government War Crimes in Racak", <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/kosovo98/racak.shtml>

5. Hamza Karčić, "Serbia Is Taking a Page Out of Russia's Book", April 24, 2023, Foreign Policy, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/24/serbia-balkans-expansionism-russia-monte-negro-elections/>

2. Total Defence Concept of Republic of Serbia, 2024, p.4

pursuing closer ties with the Alliance. At the same time, it engages with Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) by purchasing weaponry, participating in high-profile drills, and emphasizing defense cooperation. Serbia's military hardware is predominantly of Russian and Chinese origin.

Although, at first, it looks like Serbia is balancing between NATO and CSTO, the use of language on strategic documents suggests that Serbia is leaning hard on one side. While Serbia only seeks a limited cooperation with NATO within PfP framework and see that as an interest, on the other hand Serbia seems committed to expanding and enhancing the cooperation with CSTO, as the following excerpts from the National Security Strategy of Serbia show:

- > "The Republic of Serbia expands and deepens the existing level of its cooperation with the CSTO ... The Republic of Serbia will bolster mutual confidence with the CSTO for the purpose of achievement of common objectives." (p. 52)
- > "The Republic of Serbia is committed to extending and enhancing cooperation with the CSTO, as well as with its Member States ... the Republic of Serbia is committed to expanding and enhancing cooperation with the CSTO." (pp. 37-39)
- > "The Republic of Serbia does not have any intention of becoming a member of NATO..." (p. 51)
- > "The Republic of Serbia intends to promote political dialogue and practical cooperation with NATO in the common interest. The cooperation of the Republic of Serbia with NATO, through the Partnership for Peace Programme as an optimal level of cooperation, will contribute to the improvement of bilateral relations with the countries of the region that are NATO members or candidates, for the purpose of preserving peace and improving stability in the region." (p. 39)

Serbia's National Security Strategy identifies Kosovo as a primary security threat. Kosovo looms largest in Serbia's security doctrine, as a direct challenge to Serbia and portrayed in official rhetoric as the product of meddling by external powers. The strategy also cites concerns about radical Islamist elements, in an effort to portray Kosovo as a breeding ground for extremist elements of all kinds. Yet, the Serbian security doctrine

fails to recognize far-right movements within Serbia as a security concern, and reasons for this might be related to the close and often symbiotic relationship between the security apparatus in Serbia and far-right elements in the party. This selective emphasis—spotlighting Islamic or Albanian extremism while paying less attention to domestic ultranationalism—shows that Serbian security doctrine reflects a political agenda rather than a fact-based and analysis oriented understanding of the security context of Serbia and the Western Balkans

By framing Kosovo's independence as a security crisis for Serbia, Serbian leaders justify defense spending and strict policies, including policies that undermine democracy in Serbia itself. Warnings of "foreign-backed" movements can likewise be used to delegitimize internal dissent. President Vucic has used this kind of rhetoric to attack civil society in Serbia in several occasions.

Regional Stabilizer or Sphere of Influence? Belgrade often presents itself as a stabilizing force in the Western Balkans, by showcasing participation in some regional dialogue initiatives. Serbia-Albania relations for instance, and the Belgrade-Tirana direct flights are often used to boost credentials of Serbia as a rational actor. However, in practice, three (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro) of the six Western Balkan countries, face some level of malign influence from Serbia, and all have spoken openly about this. Presidency Vucic has even publicly taunted Montenegrin President over the language use.⁶ In other words, Kosovo is not the only country in the region that has problems with Serbia. Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin openly promotes the Serbian world or "Great Serbia" vision, and overt military intervention is not dismissed in Serbian security doctrine as means to achieving this.

Serbia's official stance on **EU accession** features prominently in its security doctrine, highlighting the EU's significance for economic and administrative reforms in the country. However, Belgrade is unequivocal that it will not recognize Kosovo's independence as a condition for membership. This underscores a broader skepticism about Western demands: Serbia is keen to access European funding and improve its global legitimacy, yet it remains wary of conceding

6. Euronews Albania, "Serbian Parliament approves Declaration of 'Pan-Serbian assembly'", <https://euronews.al/en/serbian-parliament-approves-declaration-of-pan-serbian-assembly/>

what it deems core national interests. This approach results in a **stop-and-go** reform trajectory. Certain EU-aligned initiatives, such as judicial improvements or anti-corruption measures, advance sufficiently to keep accession talks on track. Meanwhile, more politically charged reforms—particularly those relating to media freedom and checks on executive power—receive uneven attention. The government's skepticism about full alignment with EU policies becomes more apparent when Serbia simultaneously deepens cooperation with Russia and, increasingly, China.

The emerging **great-power competition** and the interplay between them represents a challenge for Serbia's security doctrine. Both the West and Russia treat the Western Balkans as a strategic theatre for expanding influence. Belgrade's reluctance to fully align with any single bloc – at least on paper – reflects its broader security logic: retaining freedom of maneuver and avoiding total dependence. However, the reality is that Serbia's reluctance to fully commit to the European integration process, is not only about some kind of strategic approach of balancing partnerships or transnationalism in relation to Russia, but it is about history, culture and religion. For instance, Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia Vulin holds that alliance with Russia is about the shared culture and history, which transcends economic or security dimension of cooperation. On the historical perspective, not only because of events such as WWI where Russia supported Serbia, but also in the Kosovo War in 1999, Russia vehemently opposed and continues to condemn the NATO bombing of Belgrade, denying the atrocities that the Milosevic regime committed against the Kosovar-Albanian civilians. This has produced a very pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia to this date. Studies have shown "President Vučić

perceives the West most negatively."⁷ One fact that explains Vucic's pro-Russian stance is also the fact that his policy is driven by domestic opinion. Finally, in terms of religion, the Serbian Orthodox Church continues to serve nationalist ideologies very much aligned with Moscow, which have spread elsewhere in the region such as Montenegro but is often used to hold Belgrade's grip on the Kosovar-Serb population in Kosovo as well. However, the Western actors (EU and NATO), seem to believe that Russian and Serbian ties are interest-based and opportunistic, and the partnership can be supplanted.

Serbia's security doctrine, as outlined in the National Security Strategy, blends formal neutrality with partnerships that are detrimental to EU and NATO interests, such as with CSTO and China. Relationship with Russia is more than a balancing act, it is a deeper partnership based on a sense of shared cultural ties. In this sense, Serbia's approach towards Euro-Atlantic integration can be understood as a conditional aspiration. Conditional on the premise that Serbia will be allowed to maintain the level of partnership with Russia and China, but especially Russia as it enjoys today. Whether Serbia can sustain this delicate approach depends on shifting global dynamics, international expectations, and most importantly if the EU is going to end the appeasement policy towards President Vucic. What is keeping EU's pressure on Serbia also limited, is potentially the interests of some EU member states to access Serbian minerals (e.g., lithium) as seen in the deal signed between the EU and Serbia in July 2024.

7. Jiří Němec and Bojana Zorić, "Friends or Foes within the Pan-Slavic Brotherhood: A Narrative Analysis of Aleksandar Vučić's Stance on Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine", *Nationalities Papers* (2024), 1–16 doi:10.1017/nps.2024.31, p. 12

Russia and CSTO in Serbia's National Security Strategy

Serbia's National Security Strategy repeatedly emphasizes the importance of Russia and the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as core pillars of its defense posture. Despite proclaiming military neutrality, Belgrade maintains an observer status in CSTO, works closely with Moscow on energy and defense, and relies on Russian backing in international community—especially regarding Kosovo. This raises questions about the sincerity of Serbia's neutrality, as the country in practice has deep alignment with Russia's foreign and security policy objectives.

Serbia's National Security Strategy frames Russia as an indispensable partner, overshadowing the rhetoric of balanced neutrality

Official documents acknowledge Russia's role in safeguarding Serbia's territorial integrity, particularly through its veto power in the UN Security Council (UNSC). By blocking Kosovo's bid for wider international recognition, Russia has positioned itself as Belgrade's foremost diplomatically. This support resonates in other international organizations too, as Serbia and Russia work together to prevent Kosovo's membership in institutions like UNESCO and INTERPOL. Serbia's security strategy lauds Moscow's influence, painting Russia as a pivotal force preventing what Belgrade perceives as Western-backed assaults on Serbian sovereignty. In other words, the West is bad for Serbia, and Russia is good, in terms of their intentions towards Serbia.

Such reliance on Russian diplomacy speaks to Serbia's broader "multilateral" posture, yet Serbia has adopted and amplified Moscow's narratives about global developments. In other words, it is a two-way street: If Moscow supports Serbia's position and echoes Serbia's narrative about Kosovo and other issues in the international society, Serbia has an obligation to reciprocate. The Serbian government regularly cites shared cultural ties with Russia to justify its relations, but this has left Serbia susceptible to Moscow's own

agendas. Indeed, whenever Serbia seeks progress with the European Union (on alignment with foreign and security policy) or especially NATO, it must tread carefully not to upset a Kremlin that expects loyalty in return for diplomatic cover on Kosovo. This was recently seen in the Europe-backed UN resolution on Ukraine, where Serbia voted in favor of the resolution and later apologized to the Kremlin.

Moreover, Russia's role extends beyond support at UNSC and rhetorical gestures during UNMIK reporting on Kosovo. Through arms deals, infrastructure investments, and preferential natural gas contracts, Moscow has become a cornerstone of Serbia's security architecture—at times overshadowing attempts to engage the West. Most recently, the United States imposed sanctions on the largely Russian-owned Serbian Petroleum Company (NIS).⁸ In February Serbian Foreign Minister Marko Djuric visited Moscow to discuss expanding the strategic partnership between Serbia and Russia.⁹ The visit most likely was connected on arrangements regarded to NIS. Belgrade's public messaging emphasizes sovereign decision-making, but the extent to which Serbia can diverge from Russia's stances without jeopardizing critical backing remains uncertain, as Djuric's visit to Moscow shows. This tension questions whether Serbia's self-proclaimed neutrality is mainly a rhetorical device masking dependency.

Despite insistence on balanced foreign policy, the Strategy's content makes it clear that Russia wields a critical—and at times decisive— influence over Serbia's foreign and security policy. Russia sees Serbia as a fertile ground to recruit agents for its intelligence services.¹⁰

8. US imposes sanctions on Serbia's Russian-owned petrol industry, January 10, 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/10/serbias-vucic-to-speak-with-putin-following-us-sanctions-against-russian-owned-oil-firm>

9. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Serbia Marko Djuric following talks, Moscow, February 17, 2025, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1998052/

10. Stradner, Ivana and Montgomery, Mark "Putin Wants War in the Balkans," WSJ, March 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/opinion/putin-wants-war-in-the-balkans-02bdcc5a>

Serbia's observer status in the CSTO deepens its alignment with Russia

Although Serbia is not a formal CSTO member, its participation in military exercises, intelligence-sharing, and strategic dialogues signals a deeper bond than official neutrality suggests. The Serbian National Security Strategy (2021) cites observer status as a means to engage "like-minded" partners, but how Serbia can keep a distance when the CSTO is positioned as a counterweight to NATO. Close coordination with CSTO members grants Serbia access to defense resources and high-level security forums controlled by Moscow.

In practice, Belgrade's reliance on CSTO channels strengthens the perception that Serbia is quietly tilting toward Eastern security cooperation frameworks. Observer status affords privileges akin to membership: Serbian officers train alongside Russian and Belarusian counterparts, and joint maneuver scenarios often portray NATO-style aggression. Meanwhile, Serbia insists it merely seeks to modernize its armed forces, pointing out that it also cooperates with the West under NATO's Partnership for Peace. But, Serbia's constant oscillation between two opposing blocs can inflame suspicion on both sides, although to a surprise of many in the Western Balkans and the EU, this has not happened.

It seems for the EU leaders, access to Serbia's minerals¹¹ comes before any kind of normative approach towards Serbia's links with Russia and China, or its treatment of civil society and media. Growing support for far-right in the EU has further embolden President Vucic and his autocratic practices.

Serbia's National Security Strategy portrays CSTO as a benign component of "multilateralism", which overlooks the precarious balance Belgrade is attempting to maintain. The more Serbia benefits from CSTO partnership, the less plausible its claims of unconditional neutrality appear—raising doubts about how long it can walk this diplomatic tightrope.

11. Reuters, "Serbia, EU and Germany sign battery supply chain deal" July 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/serbia-eu-germany-sign-battery-supply-chain-deal-2024-07-19/>

Serbia's military and security cooperation with Russia reveals a strong reliance on Moscow's defense expertise

Joint exercises with Russian troops, regular arms purchases, and extensive defense training dominate Serbia's security arrangements with Moscow. The Serbian National Security Strategy emphasizes these programs as avenues to upgrade the Serbian Armed Forces: advanced fighter jets, helicopters, and air defense systems provided by Russia have strengthened Belgrade's military capabilities. Government officials in Serbia contend that such transactions are purely strategic, aimed at ensuring Serbia can deter perceived threats—particularly in the context of Kosovo.

However, Serbia knows that NATO/KFOR is responsible for Kosovo's security, so by using Kosovo as a justification to increase its military capabilities, Serbia is effectively saying it is preparing for a potential scenario of confrontation with NATO. Some of the joint drills where Serbia participates with CSTO feature scenarios that simulate responses to hypothetical Western adversaries, meaning NATO.

Belgrade dismisses such worries as overblown, by referencing similar cooperation with Western partners. However, the symbolic weight of massive Russian-supplied weaponry on Serbian soil is hard to ignore. Domestic audiences with pro-Russian sentiments view each arms delivery as a validation of Serbia's historical alliance with Russia, increasing public skepticism toward EU and NATO. President Vucic himself has consistently fueled EU-skepticism with his speeches and actions.

Serbian National Security Strategy (2021) frames the security partnership with Russia as key to Serbian sovereignty, because it purportedly allows Serbia to counter efforts by any bloc to dictate Belgrade's decisions. However, Serbia's – at least official – position is that it wants to join a bloc, respectively the European Union (EU), therefore promoting closer ties with Russia and CSTO as means to counter the influence of the West is laughable and a political manipulation. What is important to note, is that the more Serbia invests in Moscow's military systems, the greater the challenge to ignore. Maintenance contracts, specialized training, and integrated technology can create long-term

dependencies that outlive political rhetoric about neutrality.

Russia's dominant role in Serbia's energy security strengthens the grip over Belgrade's foreign and security policy

Energy security occupies a central spot in the Serbian National Security Strategy (2021), and Russia stands out as Serbia's primary supplier of natural gas and a major investor in its oil infrastructure. Over time, deals with giants like Gazprom have consolidated Moscow's grip on Serbia's energy sector, bringing lower prices and preferential terms that Belgrade frequently touts. The Strategy cites such cooperation as crucial to ensuring stable energy supplies and preventing shortages. Yet this heavy reliance fosters a structural dependency that constrains Serbia's options, especially where EU energy policies are concerned. Even if Belgrade wished to adopt more stringent EU guidelines—whether on market liberalization or carbon reduction—it would face resistance at home from interest groups benefiting from the status quo. Meanwhile, Moscow can leverage Serbia's dependence to secure other political or economic concessions, ensuring that any break from Russian energy would come at a steep cost.

This configuration has broader regional implications. As Serbia is a transit route for Russian gas to neighboring countries, it gains influence in the Western Balkans. The National Security Strategy of Serbia does not describe this dependence on Russian gas as a risk, preferring

to emphasize cooperation and affordability. However, Serbia's close knit ties with Russian energy interests feeds suspicions in Brussels about Belgrade's readiness to align with EU standards. Fundamentally, the reliance on Russian resources shows how Serbia's pursuit of immediate benefits can/will hinder the country's stated aim of deeper European integration, and this would make Serbia a country in a permanent balancing act, and this is something where Kosovo, should take note.

Serbia has increased over the years its alignment with Russian foreign policy

While Serbia highlights Russia as a "global partner in multilateralism," it also refrains from fully endorsing Moscow's actions, such as recognizing Crimea's annexation. This calculated stance allows Belgrade to reap benefits—diplomatic backing on Kosovo, defense assistance, and energy deals—without formalizing its commitment to Russia's broader ambitions, yet Serbia has declined to join Western sanctions against Russia. By publicly championing nonalignment, Serbian officials position themselves as independent actors who can leverage ties in both directions, but reality in the ground is, that neither the EU nor US, have the kind of influence and leverage that Russia has over Serbia.

The Serbian National Security Strategy ultimately presents Russia as the essential counterweight against perceived Western pressure, particularly over Kosovo.

China in Serbia's National Security Strategy

Serbia's National Security Strategy (2021) casts China as an indispensable partner across economic, diplomatic, and increasingly security-related areas. While China does not have the same explicit military influence as Russia in Serbia, it figures prominently in infrastructure projects, technology deals, and the international effort to block Kosovo's recognitions. Serbian officials emphasize Beijing's role in sustaining a multipolar foreign policy, where reliance on Western support can be offset by non-Western alliances.

The National Security Strategy of Serbia frames China as a both security and economic partner

Serbia is arguably China's main partner in Europe, not in terms of volume of economic exchange, but in terms of how both countries perceive and view each other. The most recent Europe tour of Chinese President Xi Jinping included only three countries, among them Serbia, in a clear sign that Serbia holds a particular relevance for China. The Serbian National Security Strategy praises Chinese financial and development cooperation, because Beijing's funds come without the conditions related to democratic governance or environment frequently tied to EU or IMF loans. In the government's view, this circumvents the bureaucratic hurdles and political strings that usually accompany EU or US financial support.

However Serbian government enthusiasm over Chinese projects carries important hidden costs. Infrastructure financed by Chinese banks often involves higher interest rates or guaranteed minimum usage clauses, raising concerns about potential debt traps, like the case with Montenegro showed.¹² More importantly, the quality of Chinese projects, is a major issue, as shown recently with the collapse of part of a roof in a train station renovated by a Chinese company, which has sparked major protests in the country. The Serbian National Security Strategy hails ties with China as proof of Serbia's growing status as a global partner. It

is more likely than not, that Serbia-China partnership deepens dependency of Serbia rather than it helps its economic growth and development, however such an understanding is not shared by the public in Serbia, who share an overwhelming positive view of China.¹³

China's expanding digital footprint in Serbia indicates a deeper technology and security partnership than official rhetoric admits in Belgrade

Beyond roads and bridges, China's cooperation with Serbia also encompasses advanced digital infrastructure. Huawei plays a central role in Serbia's 5G rollout and smart-city surveillance systems. The National Security Strategy emphasizes the importance of digital transformation for national development but sidesteps the more sensitive issue of cybersecurity vulnerabilities that can come with Chinese tech. EU, for instance, has flagged potential data-privacy risks and possible backdoor access by state-linked firms, however these were ignored by Serbia. This suits the broader theme echoed in Serbia's National Security Strategy of resisting the pressure from the West and countering such pressure with other bilateral partnerships. As a result of cooperation with China, Serbia is sliding into a digital ecosystem heavily influenced by Chinese standards. The presence of AI-driven surveillance technology—such as facial-recognition cameras—has fueled debates over privacy rights and the potential for political misuse.

A particular concern is that Serbia's telecommunications backbone is increasingly becoming tied to Chinese hardware and extricating it will be a daunting task. This integration creates a subtle but powerful dependency, making Serbia much more vulnerable to shifts in Beijing's policies and priorities, which are in the horizon with the growing geopolitical tensions between US and EU with China.

12. "Euractiv, "Montenegro learns true cost of China-backed \$1 billion road to nowhere" June 2, 2021 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/montenegro-learns-true-cost-of-china-backed-1-billion-road-to-nowhere/>

13. IRI, "Western Balkans Regional Poll: February –March 2024", <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/> p. 53

Although the Serbian National Security Strategy underscores the importance of cybersecurity, it offers little clarity on how Serbia intends to mitigate risks tied to external tech providers, such as China. The end result is a digital sector that simultaneously boosts Serbia's economic aspirations and raises serious questions about transparency and strategic or security related vulnerability—an uneasy trade-off that reflects the broader complexities of Serbia's partnership with China.

In tandem with Russia, China provides leverage for Serbia in international mechanisms with respect to Kosovo

While Russia's UNSC veto is often highlighted as Belgrade's primary tool against Kosovo's recognition, China's position proves equally significant.¹⁴ Even though Kosovo and China have trade relations, the latter has refused to acknowledge Kosovo's independence. The National Security Strategy portrays China's stance on Kosovo as a welcomed counterweight to Western-led pushes for more recognition of Kosovo's statehood. By broadening its international relations base, Serbia believes it can deter more recognitions of Kosovo and maintain stronger negotiating power on the EU-facilitated dialogue for normalization of relations. Serbian National Security Strategy places its alliance with China within a larger pattern of shared interests, such as Serbia supporting "One China" policy and opposing Taiwan. However, this alliance can prove difficult for Serbia if Sino-Western rivalries deepen, which seem to be the case with President Trump.

Serbian government see alignment with China as an asset, enabling them to resist what they perceive as external pressure to make concessions over Kosovo. In other words, Serbia leverages China ties vis-à-vis the West, and its partnership is about Serbia resisting the West, and this approach is fostered by EU's appeasement policy towards Serbia.

For Serbia to have Russia and China, two permanent

members of the Security Council and major world powers, on Serbia's side and maintaining this relationship seems to be of vital interest for Serbia. Even though some would caution that leaning too heavily on Beijing and Moscow could affect Belgrade's relations with the EU or the U.S., neither seem – at least at the moment – interested to pressure Serbia to limit its relations with Russia and China. For now, Serbia's National Security Strategy champions China as an indispensable ally in staving off recognition of Kosovo.

What contributes to the success of Serbia's foreign policy in preventing the recognition and integration of Kosovo in the international arena is that, for a long period now, Kosovo has largely followed a predominantly reactive foreign policy. Additionally, observers have recently raised concerns about the performance of Kosovo's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, noting that the ministry has faced significant challenges in advancing the country's international relations.

China's growing security presence in Serbia is an indicator of broader ambitions, rather than purely economic engagement

Although Russia's role in arming the Serbian military often draws headlines, Beijing has quietly ramped up its own defense cooperation with Belgrade. The purchase of CH-92A combat drones, for example, marks a milestone in Sino-Serbian military ties, introducing new technology that strengthens Serbia's aerial surveillance and strike capabilities. Serbian official documents rarely elaborate on how these acquisitions align with broader defense objectives, but the Serbian National Security Strategy promotes a desire to "diversify security partnerships," a phrase that would further Serbia away from Western military industrial complex. However, again, this does not seem to be of serious concern for EU or US.

China's involvement in policing is another dimension of this security-budding relationship. Joint patrols between Chinese and Serbian police, primarily intended to protect Chinese nationals and businesses in Serbia, are a symbolic move toward deeper security cooperation. Such security and policing arrangements are only possible in cases when security institutions from respective countries share a high degree of trust in each other. China implemented a similar law

14. Ramadan Ilazi and Stefan Vladislavijev, "The Implications of China-Serbia Relations for Kosovo", *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/the-implications-of-china-serbia-relations-for-kosovo/>

enforcement presence in parts of Africa and Asia.

The Serbian National Security Strategy (2021) polishes the concerns of potential ramifications for Serbia's relations with the EU and NATO, both of which are very critical of Beijing's expanding global security and economic role. By embracing Chinese security assistance, Serbia is testing Western tolerance, and so far it seem this approach has worked for Serbia. Serbian policymakers view cooperation with China as a calculated step toward greater self-reliance, even though the country aspires membership in the EU.

In the long term, it is clear that the depth of Serbia's

alignment with China will attract friction from the EU and even from the US, which have grown more vocal about countering Beijing's influence in candidate countries. Still, public opinion in Serbia remains comparatively receptive to Chinese presence, bolstered by media portrayals of swift infrastructure builds and pandemic-era medical aid. However, the public opinion in Serbia about China is changing, after the Novi Sad tragedy.¹⁵

15. Guy Delauney "Fury over Serbia station tragedy prompts first arrests", BBC, 22 November 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0qdyg8yn5yo>

The West in Serbia's Security Doctrine

Serbia's National Security Strategy (2021) promotes a nuanced relationship with Western powers, which is to say the West is essential for economic growth of Serbia but also perceived as a source of political interference. This section examines how the West (EU, US and NATO), are viewed by Serbia from the perspective of its security doctrine.

Serbian National Security Strategy has ruled out membership in NATO, however Serbia still sees NATO as an important security actor in the Western Balkans. Serbia's approach to NATO is justified in the security documents with the 1999 bombing campaign of NATO against Serbia. The Serbian government consistently promotes greater ties with NATO as politically radioactive, even though this might be a tactical move rather than a reflection of genuine perceptions among the larger public. For instance, Serbia is one of the first countries of the Western Balkans to join NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and has conducted joint exercises and sharing intelligence on counterterrorism. This is a Jacke and Hylde dual reality: Serbia resents NATO's perceived role in undermining its sovereignty—because Alliance's support of Kosovo—while also being part of major NATO programs and promoting security ties that deliver material benefits.

Serbia sees cooperation with NATO as a "technical necessity" rather than a genuine commitment. Loyalty among Serbia's security institutions might be divided between those who are loyal to Russian-ties and others who want greater ties with the West (NATO).

Even in Kosovo, where NATO's KFOR presence is acknowledged by Serbia as critical to preventing conflict, government in Belgrade openly criticizes NATO's backing of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF), fiercely rejecting any move to transform it into a proper army. In 2018, Kosovo transformed the mandate of the KSF to include territorial defense, and while NATO publicly did not endorse this, the move by Kosovo institutions was coordinated with the United States.

In practice, the complicated NATO-Serbia dance with limited joint exercises, intelligence exchanges, and vehement rhetorical opposition, unveils the central ethos of Belgrade's security doctrine—that

Serbia, while engaging the West, will never fully subordinate or integrates its security apparatus to an alliance it associates with the bombing of 1999 and detrimental to its aspirations over Kosovo.

The EU remains Serbia's primary economic and political partner, yet the Serbian security doctrine reveals a deep ambivalence toward relations with the West

Many scholars and independent journalists would agree that under President Vucic, Serbia does not truly seek membership in the EU. European integration has been often promoted by President Vucic as somehow detrimental to Serbia's national interests. The National Security Strategy (2021) acknowledges the EU's role in helping economic growth through, however, tensions emerge where EU demands collide with Serbia's ambitions of sovereignty—particularly over Kosovo. The Serbian security doctrine is based on the assumption that the accession process of the country must remain "status-neutral," when it comes to Kosovo. Serbia's government often argues that the EU itself suffers from enlargement fatigue and internal divisions, which undermine its capacity to handle Western Balkan disputes. This is to say that Serbia does not truly believe the EU is willing to enlarge, and therefore why fully align with the EU. Serbian officials use these perceived weaknesses to protract fulfillment of EU obligations, not only with respect to alignment with the foreign and security policy, but also on domestic issues, concerning the treatment of civil society and media. The Serbian security doctrine frames this kind of relationship with the EU as strategic engagement without full alignment.

This guarded approach to the EU reflects broader skepticism about the West in Serbia. While billions of euros in investment and trade characterize relations between Serbia and the EU, Belgrade has grown accustomed to circumventing its obligations. The National Security Strategy underscores how Serbia has cultivated ties with Russia and China, both of which lend economic and vital diplomatic support vis-à-vis Kosovo and, crucially, for Serbia, they do not ask to recognize Kosovo or respect free media and civil society and reform its government. This dance is a fine

balance between courting Brussels for economic gain and resisting the political strings attached.

In other words, despite EU's dominant influence in the Western Balkans, Serbia's Strategy projects a future where Belgrade cooperates with Europe on its own terms and leaving questions around Kosovo unresolved. Key question here is will the EU tolerate this?

The United States is recognized as a major power in the Western Balkans by Serbia, but from the security perspective mistrusted due to Serbia's strategic calculations

Throughout the National Security Strategy (2021), the U.S. looms indirectly—associated with NATO's 1999 bombing campaign and the subsequent drive to establish Kosovo as an independent state. Serbia's government emphasize the American assistance to the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) as a prime example of foreign interference, alleging that Washington's support solidifies a "separatist entity" in violation of UNSC Resolution 1244. This even though the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law or the UNSC Resolution 1244.¹⁶ This kind of rhetorical demonization of the U.S. by Serbian political leadership has fueled a public narrative that has come to view the U.S., not as friendly.

However, the Serbian National Security Strategy (2021) does not advocate a total rejection of US partnership. Serbia acknowledges that the U.S. can be a valuable partner on specific issues like counterterrorism, or economy. Serbia and the U.S., have vibrant bilateral initiatives of cooperation in law enforcement, trade, and business that are seen as mutually beneficial. Nonetheless, the Serbian National Security Strategy (2021), indirectly shows a certain level of unease and vigilance on the part of the Serbian government with respect to the U.S., role in Serbia. This seems to be largely as a result of fears by Serbian government that somehow the U.S., could intervene to for a "regime change" or "manipulation" of the public through soft-power channels. For Serbian government these soft-power channels are

16. ICJ, "Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo", <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/141>

seen as non-government organizations or civil society. This became evident when Serbian government has raided non-government organizations funded by the USAID.¹⁷ Serbian government itself has been engaged in cyberattacks against civil society organizations that are critical of the government.¹⁸ In other words, for Serbian government the West is part of what they see as "hybrid threats," which the National Security Strategy (2021) frames in part as foreign-sponsored influence operations. Though not named explicitly, the implication is that Serbia sees Western intelligence services, possibly led by the U.S., as capable of shaping domestic politics.

This fear of covert interference from the West feeds into Serbia's desire to broaden ties with non-Western powers. In other words, relations with Russia and China, are also about President Vucic saving its own job and hold to power. In this sense, Serbian ties with Russia and China are relational and personal, and a potential regime change in Serbia could jeopardize this kind of partnership. Therefore, Russia and China, also actively help the Serbian government to counter any Western support for democratic actors in Serbia. For Serbia, the United States is both a linchpin of regional security but also a constant source of anxiety. However, this has started to change under President Trump, which President Vucic has publicly praised.

The appointment of the Mark Brnovich as ambassador to Serbia, is the first sign of the potential for improved diplomatic relations between Serbia and U.S.

While Serbia has taken steps to strengthen its relationship with the United States, critics argue that the Kosovo government has strained its ties with Washington by declining to coordinate or consult on actions and policies affecting the predominantly Serb-inhabited area in the north of Kosovo.

Engagement with the West is seen from Serbia's security doctrine as

17. Radio Free Europe, "Serbian Police Raids Target NGOs Supported By USAID" February 25, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbian-police-raids-target-ngos-supported-usaid/33327873.html>

18. Amnesty International, "Serbia: Authorities using spyware and Cellebrite forensic extraction tools to hack journalists and activists", December 16, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/serbia-authorities-using-spyware-and-cellebrite-forensic-extraction-tools-to-hack-journalists-and-activists/>

simultaneously an economic lifeline and a political minefield

The National Security Strategy paints a picture of a country reliant on Western investments, technological know-how, and security networks, yet striving to resist norms and standards from the EU. For Serbia, economic ties with Western states, especially the EU, remain a crucial driver of modernization: the EU is Serbia's largest trading partner. Nevertheless, the Strategy warns that such cooperation can become a lever to force political compromise—especially on the issue of Kosovo.

From the perspective of the security doctrine of Serbia, walking this tightrope, of in one hand seeing the West as an actor of malign influence on the other as vital economic partner, involves constant negotiations. One day, Belgrade might host a high-profile economic forum welcoming EU or U.S., business community; the next, officials could publicly condemn Western attempts to “rewrite” Balkan borders or steer judicial reforms. This ambivalence shows the complexities of a country courting foreign capital, but fearful of their norms and intentions.

Serbia's “four pillars” foreign policy is a balancing act, but in reality these pillars differ in terms of relevance for Serbia, and might not be very sustainable in the long term

In 2009, then President of Serbia, Boris Tadic, stated that Serbia follows a four pillars foreign policy,

respectively: one pillar would be the European Union (EU), Russia, United States, and fourth pillar China.¹⁹

This is the order of the four pillars how President Tadic presented, which can be seen as an order of relevance of each actor to Serbia. In official rhetoric, Serbian leaders frequently refer to their partnership with the EU, the U.S., Russia, and China as the backbone of a “multivector” foreign policy. Rather than committing entirely to one camp, the National Security Strategy (2021) details a patchwork of engagements designed to maximize benefits and minimize vulnerabilities. From Russia, Serbia secures military hardware and international support on Kosovo; from China, it gets infrastructure investments, technology upgrades but also international support on Kosovo. Meanwhile, the EU and the U.S. provide vital economic and development support, but lack the kind of treatment and influence China and Russia are afforded in the security sector. This balancing act of Serbia in foreign policy has become much harder to sustain amid the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, and the emerging tensions between the EU and the US side with respect to Russia. On the one hand, Serbia's formal EU membership process demand alignment with EU foreign policy positions, including sanctions. On the other, refusing sanctions is popular among Serbian citizens (over 80% of the population currently opposes sanctions on Russia).²⁰

19. B92, “Tadić on Serbia's “four pillars of diplomacy”, August 30, 2009, https://www.b92.net/o/eng/news/politics?yyyy=2009&m=08&dd=30&nav_id=61454

20. Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes and Slađan Rankić, “Serbian Foreign Policy in the Wake of the War in Ukraine”, July, 2022, KAS, <https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/serbian-foreign-policy-in-the-wake-of-the-war-in-ukraine>

Implications of the Strategy for Kosovo

Serbia's National Security Strategy (2021) puts Kosovo at the center of Belgrade's security concerns, framing it as a continued security threat rather than a political dispute. In this sense, from Serbia's security doctrine perspective solution to Kosovo "problem" is a security one rather than a political, even though the country has accepted and engages in the EU-facilitated dialogue for normalization of relations with Kosovo. The Serbian security doctrine reinforces Serbia's refusal to recognize the right of Kosovo to exist as a state. From opposing the Kosovo Security Force (KSF), to portraying Kosovo as a hotspot for extremism and foreign interference, the Serbian security doctrine is designed in a manner that justifies Serbia's aggressive policies towards Kosovo, even potential military intervention, if – in a highly-unlikely scenario – it does not lead to confrontation. Having discussed how different actors are portrayed in Serbian security doctrine, this section now analyzes what the Serbian security doctrine means for Kosovo.

The Serbian security doctrine portrays Kosovo as a core security threat, legitimizing not only Serbia's resistance to its independence, but also interference in Kosovo

Throughout the National Security Strategy (2021), Kosovo appears not merely as a political dispute but as a direct security challenge to Serbia. The document cites Kosovo's declaration of independence as a destabilizing move, depicting it as separatism endorsed by external forces, an indirect reference to U.S., and EU. Serbian officials see governmental institutions in Kosovo as "illegitimate", claiming they infringe upon the rights of Serbian communities. This narrative provides a rationale for Belgrade's active campaign in international community to prevent Kosovo's recognition. However, Serbia has made numerous deals in the framework of the EU-led dialogue for normalization of relations with institutions it considers "illegitimate" and the 2010 ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), made

it clear that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law.²¹ But the Serbian security doctrine, and the language in its National Security Strategy goes beyond simple opposition to independence; it insinuates that Kosovo's existence as a state threatens the broader Western Balkan security. Serbia also attacks international recognitions of Kosovo as catalyst for regional fragmentation. In other words, Serbia, at least from its security doctrine perspective, is not interested nor seeks to have good neighborly relations with Kosovo, not only a fundamental EU standards for any member state, but also a foundational principle of international law, as enshrined in the declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with Charter of the United Nations.²² In other words, Serbian security doctrine entrenches a zero-sum approach towards Kosovo, limiting room for constructive engagement. Belgrade's approach is also supported by countries unwilling to recognize Kosovo, but at the same time creates friction with EU member states and the U.S., which demand normalization of relations between the two countries. Yet for Serbian leaders, the language of security risk remains potent. In this sense, the Strategy's emphasis on Kosovo as a security threat cements Belgrade's combative stance—one in which any diplomatic progress is conditioned on Serbia's terms. This approach appeals to domestic audiences and fuels nationalism and ethno-political radicalization, which keep President Vucic in power.²³

21. ICJ, "Accordance with international law of the unilateral declaration of independence in respect of Kosovo" <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/141#:~:text=In%20its%20Advisory%20Opinion%20delivered,did%20not%20violate%20international%20law%E2%80%9D>.

22. Sompong Sucharitkul, 1996, "The Principles of Good-Neighborliness in International Law", <https://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1559&context=pubs>

23. Ramadan Ilazi, Ardit Orana, Teuta Avdimetaj, Bledar Feta, Ana Krstinovska, Yorgos Christidis and Ioannis Armakolas 2022. Online and offline (de)radicalisation in the Balkans. Working paper 5. PAVE Project Publications. https://www.pave-project.eu/user/pages/07.publications/PAVE_870769_D5.1_publication_layout.pdf

Serbia insists on the continued international military presence in Kosovo

For Serbia the only legitimate military presence in Kosovo, is NATO's KFOR mission. NATO's presence in Kosovo is a central pillar for security and stability not only in Kosovo but the Western Balkans region.²⁴ If a referendum were held in Kosovo, 94 percent would vote in favor of membership of Kosovo in NATO.²⁵

However, Serbian position on international military presence in Kosovo is about Serbia's broader effort to keep Kosovo's status in limbo, rather than genuine support for NATO. Serbia does not want Kosovo to be able to shape its own security policy.

Serbian officials interpret the formation of a Kosovar army as a direct threat to regional stability, arguing that it contravenes both international law and past agreements. For Serbia, a Kosovo army with capabilities to defend Kosovo, is seen as a threat to their vital interests. Serbian security doctrine posits that increased in military capabilities of Kosovo might pave the way for escalated tensions or clashes along borders. However these claims are myths, as NATO has the responsibility to protect Kosovo borders. Furthermore, these concerns never materialized after Kosovo Assembly changed the mandate of the KSF in 2018 to include territorial defense.²⁶ Serbia is likely to lobby NATO members and the UN to maintain a robust international presence in Kosovo and potentially undermine cooperation with KSF. **Through diplomatic channels, Belgrade will seek to slow or block KSF's evolution and development.** While such efforts may add friction to an already delicate situation, Serbian leaders see this approach as a necessary against what they view as the incremental recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty.

24. Ramadan Ilazi and Leureta Lumi, "From Crisis Management to Stability and Integration: Navigating Kosovo's Security Landscape", April 17, 2024, New Lines Institute, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/political-systems/from-crisis-management-to-stability-and-integrationnavigating-kosovos-security-landscape/>

25. IRI, "National Survey of Kosovo: May 2024", July 30, 2024, <https://www.iri.org/resources/national-survey-of-kosovo-may-2024/>

26. Florian Qehaja and Ramadan Ilazi, "Busting myths about KSF transition into a defence force", June 17, 2021, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/KSF_Eng_223324.pdf

By framing Kosovo as a hotbed of extremism and organized crime, Serbia reinforces a negative security narrative to delegitimize the state of Kosovo in the eyes of the EU and the West

Within the Serbian Security Strategy, Kosovo is repeatedly depicted as a center of radicalization, crime, and even human trafficking. These accusations are made without any proof to substantiate. Serbia itself has had its own share of challenges with far-right extremism and radicalization, as well as the phenomena of foreign terrorist fighters, as a number of its citizens joined the pro-Russian groups in Ukraine. Foreign fighters from Serbia contributed to both the 2014 annexation of Crimea as well as Russia's full invasion in 2022.²⁷ Russia openly recruited fighters from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia²⁸, and reports from 2017 show a Russian funded organized called "Kosovo Front" managed to recruit around 300 Serbian fighters.²⁹ Serbian officials argue that Kosovo has failed to honor the agreements made in the framework of the EU facilitated dialogue for normalization of relations, however, the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities (ASM) is not mentioned specifically, which is at political level a constant part of the Serbian foreign policy discourse. One potential reason why this is not mentioned in Serbia's Security Strategy (2021), is perhaps because solutions from the normalization dialogue that promote integration of north of Kosovo with the rest of the country are not favored by the security establishment. Serbia hopes in the possible annexation of the north of Kosovo – an objective that President Vucic has hinted at when talking about how Serbia should follow the Azerbaijan strategy in reference to the Nagorno Karabakh region.³⁰

27. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, "Balkans fighters are taking up arms in Ukraine, with risks for organized crime", <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/see-obs-014/04-balkans-fighters-are-taking-up-arms-in-ukraine.html>

28. Azra Husaric Omerovic, "Serb Volunteers Answer Call to Fight in Ukraine" Balkan Insight, March 8, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/08/serb-volunteers-answer-call-to-fight-in-ukraine/>

29. Radio Free Europe quoted in Koha, "The Russian organization "Kosovo Front" recruits Serbs in the war against Ukraine" October 26, 2017 <https://www.koha.net/en/arberi/organizata-ruse-fronti-i-kosoves-rekruton-serbe-ne-lufte-kunder-ukraines>

30. Demush Shasha, X, December 12, 2023, <https://x.com/DemushShasha/status/1734523413975236760>; Euronews Albania "Serbian President compares the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Kosovo is portrayed in the security doctrine as a failing state and a source of religious extremism and jihadism, illicit trade, and other forms of transnational crime. At times Kosovo government actions and inactions (especially failure to coordinate and consult U.S., EU, and NATO about the north) inadvertently help Serbia's efforts to portray Kosovo as an irrational actor in the EU-led dialogue for normalization dialogue, that serve the broader goal of delegitimization of the country. What is perhaps interesting to note is that Serbia's security doctrine, to a certain extent depicts the Muslim community in the region, and especially in Kosovo, as detrimental to its security. By making references to religious extremism and jihadism, the

Serbian security doctrine seems to be an effort to place the country's grievances vis-à-vis Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the broader context of the 'cultural wars' which are especially popular with the far-right movements in the EU and the U.S. For instance, the U.S., journalist Tucker Carlson has framed the NATO bombing against Yugoslavia and Serbia in 1999 to stop ethnic cleansing as NATO bombing a "Christian country".³¹

Such claims against Kosovo serve multiple functions. Domestically, they rally public support for a zero-tolerance policy toward Kosovo. Internationally, these narratives can become very helpful for Serbia, in cases when far-right political parties become part of the government in the EU member states, like the case of Slovakia or the potential case of Austria. The latter has been very vocal against Kosovo's statehood following Fico's return as Prime Minister. Belgrade also uses these narratives to counter efforts for recognition of the Kosovo's statehood, by positing that such an action would embolden criminal elements in the Western Balkans. What has emboldened or even give some credibility to Serbia's narratives against Kosovo, over the past decade or so, has been the growing populism in Kosovo, as similar narratives of Kosovo being a captured state or runed by organized crime, were echoed by political opposition within the country

with Kosovo, provokes reactions among politicians", November 13, 2020, <https://euronews.al/en/serbian-president-com-pares-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-with-kosovo-pro-vokes-reactions-among-politicians/>

31. Kosovo Online "Carlson: NATO is not a defensive alliance; did they create Kosovo by defending themselves?" February 1, 2025, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/tucker-carlson-nato-not-defensive-alliance-who-yugoslavia-attacked-it-1-2-2025>

(regardless of who were these opposition parties).

Through the narratives of organized crime and violent extremism in Kosovo, Serbia tries to convince the European audience, that has grown extremely weary of irregular migration and organized crime, that an independent state of Kosovo would be a safe-haven for crime and smuggling. However, based on the data from the Global Organized Crime Index, Serbia ranks 40th globally while 3rd in Europe for criminality.³² These themes in reference to Kosovo can be identified across Serbia's security doctrine. Serbian security doctrine maintains that the international community should focus on the "real dangers" emanating from Kosovo, such as unregulated militant activities or organized smuggling rings. By positioning these issues at the forefront, Belgrade seeks to portray its own policies—like maintaining administrative control over Serb enclaves in northern Kosovo—as safeguards against such problems. The subtext is clear: If Kosovo's institutions are deemed incompetent or complicit in managing security risks, then the logic of recognizing its sovereignty becomes questionable. For Serbia, this rationale feeds into a broader bid to keep Kosovo's international legitimacy at bay, by trying to convince an international audience that Kosovo cannot responsibly govern itself without external oversight.

Serbia's security doctrine frames Kosovo as a proxy for foreign interference

The security doctrine of Serbia repeatedly suggests that Kosovo is leveraged by Western actors, primarily the EU and the U.S., to pressure Serbia into making unpopular concessions. In other words, for Serbia's security doctrine the West is seen through a malign lens when it comes to Kosovo, the same West (U.S., and EU) that Serbia wants closer ties and even integration.

The subtext is that powerful external players exploit the Kosovo as a bargaining chip, tying Serbia's path to European integration to its willingness to compromise on sovereignty. In this context Serbia would prefer that the EU-led dialogue for normalization of relations is decoupled from the European accession path of Serbia.

32. Global Organized Crime Index, <https://ocindex.net/country/serbia>

In practical terms, this viewpoint translates into a deliberate slowdown or obstruction of the normalization process. Serbian leaders argue they have little incentive to expedite dialogue if doing so means capitulating on critical points like recognition or allowing Kosovo's full integration in international society. While EU officials push for a comprehensive agreement, Belgrade counters that any talk of "normalization" must factor in Serbia's red lines. The growing influence of far-right parties in the EU, means that there is also a greater understanding or sympathy for Serbian position vis-à-vis Kosovo, and therefore less political will to pressure Serbia to fully normalize relations with Kosovo.

Serbia's primary objective is to halt Kosovo's efforts for integration in European and International community, and therefore preserving a status-quo that favors Belgrade's leverage

A key theme in the Serbian security doctrine is the intention to prevent Kosovo from consolidating its statehood in international organizations like the UN, Interpol, and UNESCO. Belgrade points to UNSC Resolution 1244 as the legal foundation for its argument, underscoring that any acknowledgment of Kosovo's independence undermines the resolution's terms. However, the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) clearly states that the declaration of independence by Kosovo in 2008 did not violate UNSC Resolution 1244. However, Serbia has been very effective in communication strategies in framing and redefining what the ICJ ruling means. Kosovo has not countered such efforts and continues to follow a reactive foreign policy. On the other hand, Serbia's approach involves proactive diplomacy: courting states that have recognized Kosovo to reverse their decisions,

while lobbying non-recognizers to remain steadfast.

Serbia's foreign policy objectives have also evolved over the years, as the Serbian government finds it more pragmatic to focus on weakening the quality of existing recognitions of the Kosovo state, rather than lobbying for de-recognition of Kosovo.

This global campaign against Kosovo, sometimes labeled a "de-recognition drive," shows how Serbia views international law, as a subject of strategic interpretations and maneuver rather than passive compliance. Even though foundational aspect of Serbia's narrative against Kosovo is international law, the country does not comply with the ICJ opinion on Kosovo's independence. On the other hand, even though Kosovo has the opinion of the world court in its favor it has spectacularly failed to capitalize on it. Belgrade continues to play a spoiler role internally in Kosovo and externally by blocking membership in bodies that address security and cultural issues, such as INTERPOL and UNESCO.

Domestically, the emphasis on blocking Kosovo's recognition resonates with segments of the population who view any endorsement of Kosovo's independence as a national betrayal. However, it is also high likely that President Vucic has inflated the public feelings towards Kosovo, in order to divert attention away from domestic issues in Serbia, related to corruption and organized crime.³³ By presenting the campaign against Kosovo as a patriotic imperative, President Vucic seeks to strengthen public support for a hardline stance, even if it complicates relations with Western partners.

33. Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, "The Chilling Story of Serbia's Human Slaughterhouse" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZZHctPA22c>; Simon Piel and Thomas Saintourens "The Serbian mafia's 'house of horror'" https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/05/20/the-serbian-mafia-s-house-of-horror_5984146_4.html#

Comparative Analysis: Kosovo's and Serbia's Security Strategies

Kosovo's Security Strategy (2022–2027) and Serbia's National Security Strategy (2021) represent fundamentally different security doctrines, reflecting distinct geopolitical alignments, threat perceptions, and priorities. While Kosovo's security strategy is firmly Euro-Atlantic oriented, prioritizing integration into NATO and the EU, Serbia's strategy maintains military neutrality, balancing cooperation between the EU, NATO, Russia, and China. Additionally, while Serbia sees Kosovo as a primary national security concern, Kosovo identifies Serbia's territorial claims and hybrid influence as its main external security threat.

Kosovo's Security Doctrine sets the Euro-Atlantic Integration as a Core Security Goal. Kosovo's security strategy is fully aligned with NATO and the EU, with a clear objective of becoming a NATO member and deepening European integration. The document emphasizes Kosovo's cooperation with Western allies, particularly the United States and European Union (EU). It sees its security and sovereignty centered on the partnership with the Euro-Atlantic institutions, particularly NATO's KFOR presence and strategic partnerships with the U.S. and European allies. On the other hand, Serbia, promotes a security doctrine centered on a balancing act of strategic relations with US, EU, China and Russia, and military neutrality. Serbia explicitly rejects NATO membership in its security doctrine, even though the country enjoys very close cooperation with NATO and it is part of the Partnership for Peace (PfP). Serbia, simultaneously engages in defense cooperation with Russia and CSTO members. In other words, Kosovo fully commits to NATO membership as a long-term security guarantee, whereas Serbia rejects NATO membership while engaging in selective cooperation. Kosovo's strategic partnerships are exclusively Western, while Serbia adopts a balancing approach, working with the West, Russia, and China.

While both countries seek EU membership, Serbia rejects Kosovo's right to exist as a state and maintains territorial claims over the country, making EU accession more complex for both. Accordingly, Kosovo identifies Serbia's territorial claims, hybrid operations, and intelligence activities as the greatest external threats to its national security. The strategy explicitly states that Serbia's political, economic, military, and intelligence cooperation with Russia poses a risk to regional stability

in the Western Balkans. Kosovo also emphasizes cybersecurity risks, misinformation campaigns, and Serbia-backed illegal/parallel structures as destabilizing elements within Kosovo. Kosovo's security doctrine also recognizes transnational crime, violent extremism, and climate change as security risks, but Serbia remains its primary external threat.

A major difference between Serbian and Kosovo security doctrine is the underlining approach on solution to their conflict. Kosovo's security doctrine is based on the assumption that solution to the dispute with Serbia can be reached in the framework of the EU-led dialogue for normalization of relations stating that: ***"Kosovo remains committed to facing the current challenges in the country but also to resolving disputes with its neighbours through dialogue; in particular with Serbia, as an equal party, based on the principles of reciprocity focusing on mutual recognition among states."***³⁴ On the other hand, for Serbia the conflict is not with Kosovo, but with Albania stating that: ***"... in the interest of regional stability and the best possible relations between Serbia and Albania, it will continue the dialogue with the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Priština with mediation of the European Union, until a lasting, sustainable and mutually acceptable agreement is reached"***³⁵ When juxtaposed, the language between the two strategies is strikingly different. Serbia does not even see Kosovo as a party to the process of normalization of relations. However, this is a rhetorical performance of sovereignty on the part of Serbia, as the reality is that the country engages with Kosovo government in the EU-

Serbia's security strategy identifies Kosovo's independence as a direct security threat to Serbia's territorial integrity. The document also emphasizes foreign interference (particularly from Western countries supporting Kosovo) as a challenge to national sovereignty.

Inclusion of such positions in Serbia's national security strategy is done primarily for two overall reasons: First, to justify increase in offensive capabilities of the Serbian Armed Forces and placing them in the south

34. Kosovo Security Strategy 2022-2027, p. 3

35. Serbian National Security Strategy 2021, p. 37.

part in border with Kosovo, and Secondly, in case of geopolitical changes and if and/or when “stars align for Serbia” to justify military intervention in Kosovo.

Serbia's national security strategy explicitly identifies Kosovo's independence as a direct threat to Serbia's territorial integrity. It also underscores foreign interference—particularly from Western countries that support Kosovo—as a challenge to Serbian national sovereignty. There are two overall reasons for Serbia to embed these positions into its national security doctrine:

First, to justify increase in military capabilities: The emphasis on Kosovo as a security threat is used to justify increasing the offensive capacity of the Serbian Armed Forces, including the deployment of additional forces to the southern border near Kosovo. This stance aims to project military strength and readiness in the event of heightened tensions.

Secondly, to justify potential military intervention: In the event of broader geopolitical changes—or if and when “the stars align for Serbia”—the strategy offers a rationale for potential military action in Kosovo. By codifying Kosovo's independence as a security threat, Belgrade can cite its own national security doctrine to legitimize any future intervention.

In effect, Serbia's security posture toward Kosovo not only positions Belgrade to respond decisively to perceived threats but also signals to international actors that Serbia is prepared to intervene in Kosovo.

Religious and political extremism are also viewed as security risks, particularly in Kosovo and Sandžak, regions with significant Muslim populations. Serbia frames Western interventionism, including NATO's role in Kosovo and EU pressures, as challenges to its autonomy. Kosovo's strategy views NATO and the EU as the primary guarantors of peace and stability in the Western Balkans. The document holds that participation in international peacekeeping efforts for Kosovo, is a vital part of the country's aspiration for membership in NATO and for aligning its foreign and security policies with Euro-Atlantic values.

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is explicitly mentioned as a major global threat by Kosovo, with concerns over Russian destabilization in the Balkans via Serbia. Kosovo aims to join NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Adriatic Charter, viewing these as a way forward to full

NATO membership. Unlike Kosovo, Serbia does not frame Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a direct security threat, maintaining an ambiguous stance on Russian aggression.

Kosovo fully embraces NATO as a security pillar, while Serbia remains militarily neutral, engaging with both NATO and Russia. Kosovo perceives Russia's influence in the region as a threat, whereas Serbia maintains strong defense ties with Moscow. Kosovo sees Western-led security architecture as vital, while Serbia remains cautious or even skeptical to some degree about NATO and Western role in the Western Balkans. Kosovo is in the process of transforming the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a full military force, also seeking to increase interoperability with NATO standards. The Kosovo security strategy promotes the goal of the country to increase its defense budget to 2% of GDP, in line with NATO requirements. The KSF is developing joint training exercises with NATO members, with U.S. and UK support in its military modernization. Serbia invests in military modernization, particularly through weapons purchases from Russia and China, alongside defense cooperation with NATO. Serbia's military strategy is defensive but focused on regional deterrence, maintaining a well-equipped army as a regional power projection tool.

Kosovo highlights Serbia's role in spreading anti-Kosovo narratives internationally and disrupting its consolidation efforts internally. Cybersecurity is a high priority, with Kosovo seeking support from NATO, the EU, and the U.S. to counter digital threats. Serbia's strategy presents foreign-backed media influence and intelligence activities as security risks, particularly from the West.

On the other hand, Russian state media (Russia Today and Sputnik) have established official branches in Serbia, and this is not seen as an issue in Serbian security doctrine. From the security doctrine perspective, for Serbia the Western media attempt to manipulate public opinion and destabilize Serbia.

Kosovo and Serbia have fundamentally opposing security strategies: Kosovo is fully NATO and EU-oriented, while Serbia remains militarily neutral, engaging with both the West and Russia/China. Each country sees the other as a core security threat, but they differ in how they see solutions. Kosovo seeks to normalize relations with Serbia through the EU-led dialogue, whereas Serbia, sees the dialogue as means to prevent consolidation of Kosovo's statehood.

Concluding reflection

Serbia's security doctrine toward Kosovo reflects a blend of historical grievance, nationalist priorities, and strategic maneuvering. Many in Belgrade's defense establishment remain keenly aware of the 1999 NATO intervention and the 2008 declaration of independence, both of which they see as national humiliations. Restoring some form of control over Kosovo—whether through hard power or by undermining its international standing—offers a chance to mend this perceived injury. It also justifies Serbia's expanded military budget, troop deployments near the southern border with Kosovo, and claims to regional primacy in the Western Balkans.

Building Kosovo into its security narrative allows Serbia's leadership to portray any settlement as an extraordinary concession. This tactic hardens Belgrade's position in negotiations and frames the issue in stark, zero-sum terms at home. Strategically, Serbia leverages support from Russia—particularly Moscow's UN Security Council veto—to prevent recognition of Kosovo on the global stage. It also cultivates deepening ties with China, whose financing arrives free from democratic conditions and provides additional economic and diplomatic cover. Together, these partnerships bolster Belgrade's ability to push back against Western pressure for normalization of relations

with Serbia or reform. And it seems this strategy is working, as both the EU and the US follow a largely appeasement policy towards President Vucic, despite his regime dismantling key democratic norms.

This approach, however, leaves the region in a state of guarded tension. By claiming that Kosovo's statehood poses an existential threat, Serbia narrows the space for compromise and fuels ongoing mistrust. Domestic audiences usually respond to the nationalist theme, often overlooking corruption, media restrictions, or other issues that rarely reach top billing when Kosovo is cast as the foremost security priority. Meanwhile, Serbia's balancing act—courting the European Union economically yet deepening partnership with Russia and China for defense and diplomatic advantages—complicates any collective effort to normalize relations with Kosovo. The result is a security doctrine that sustains nationalist sentiment, elevates Belgrade's regional standing, and leaves Kosovo in the status-quo as appeasement towards President Vucic increases. A light at the end of the tunnel seem to be the student protest across Serbia, that for the first time in over a decade have truly challenges President Vucic's regime. It remains to be seen if these demonstration will lead to a regime change and if that change will also be reflected on how Serbia sees Kosovo.

Recommendations

A major challenge in Kosovo's efforts to counter Serbia's attempts to delegitimize its statehood, critics argue, has been a foreign policy approach perceived as largely reactive. Kosovo's foreign policy and its security doctrine must be proactive rather than reactive. Kosovo must increase spending not only in security but also foreign policy to counter Serbian efforts to prevent recognitions and delegitimize its statehood. Also equally important, Kosovo government must have a capable minister of foreign affairs, and work to foster greater understanding, trust and cooperation with NATO through KFOR – which should be seen as a major opportunity – rather than be seen as potential peace spoiler by NATO. This means that the Kosovo government, must heed the advice of the US and EU, to coordinate and consult on actions and measures taken when it concern foreign policy.

The geopolitical rivalry with Serbia is unlikely to diminish in the near term, but a well-coordinated national security policy will enable Kosovo to consolidate its sovereignty, prevent external destabilization, and advance its Euro-Atlantic integration agenda. But, Kosovo's security doctrine should place integrated cooperation with NATO and the West as central to the achievement of these goals. Kosovo is unnecessarily putting the West and NATO as somehow spoilers to its objectives of state consolidation. Kosovo also must pursue a stronger NATO and bilateral security partnerships for deterrence. In this sense it is imperative to accelerate diplomatic efforts to join NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), or seek an alternative arrangement of cooperation with NATO, akin to the EU's approach of "EU only-agreement" when it signed the

SAA with Kosovo.

Kosovo should expand bilateral military cooperation with the U.S., U.K., Germany, and other NATO members. The focus should be on air and cyber defense capabilities, as Serbia's growing military capabilities, including Russian and Chinese weapons systems, pose an asymmetric threat to Kosovo's security. Kosovo should also advocate for a permanent NATO presence in Kosovo beyond KFOR. Kosovo should pursue greater defense cooperation with Albania, Turkey, and Croatia as potential sponsors of its efforts for closer ties with NATO. Kosovo government should prioritize potential mutual protection pacts with Albania and Croatia.

Kosovo Ministry of Defense, should develop a strategic communication unit to combat misinformation, particularly targeting Serbian-speaking communities and the international diplomatic sphere. Kosovo government should also establish a Kosovo Foreign Policy Task Force, which should be a multipartisan and multisectoral working group to systematically counter Serbia's diplomatic efforts against Kosovo's recognitions and integration in international community. Kosovo also must strengthen lobbying efforts in the EU, U.S., and key Global South nations to campaign for new recognitions, prevent countries from withdrawing Kosovo's recognition or weaken the quality of recognitions. For instance, Kosovo should explore greater opportunities for cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Government should support greater autonomy for Kosovo's embassies in key capitals around the globe and provide financial support for them to increase diplomatic outreach of Kosovo.

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KCSS
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Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

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