



OLD STRATEGY WITH THE NEW SETUP: TRUMP'S POLICY TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS

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- What is the new American vision for the Balkans?
- What kind of diplomatic setup will be formed under the second Trump administration?
- Is there going to be a change under the new Trump administration?
- What kind of exit strategy should be followed by the unfavored states in the region?

A New American Vision for the Balkans

The last couple of years have seen a reassessment of the American position towards the Balkans. In the 1990s, the United States was an active factor in stabilizing the region—those being Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro—fronting Belgrade. However, by the mid-2000s, American interest began to drift. The focus was shifted onto the Middle East and Afghanistan due to the Bush Administration pursuing the “Global War on Terror.” The financial crisis of 2008 only brought the focus further away from the Balkans, with the Obama Administration throwing itself into the Asia-Pacific basket, where China was just starting to get some serious attention as a rival. The Balkans were, for all intents and purposes, a marginal consideration in the papers of Washington. The last decade of dwindling American engagement in the realm has permitted and nurtured the influence play of other powers—Russia, China, and Turkey—among others. The U.S. was watching on the sidelines while its strategy for European

engagement, set in motion in the middle 2000s, was trying to grapple with the inertia of Western hegemony.

After a decade characterized by passivity during the 2010s, momentum began to shift. Many in the region—primarily Bosniaks, Albanians, Montenegrins, and various factions of Macedonians—harbored hopes that increased American involvement would yield positive results. Drawing from their previous experiences with the U.S. in the 1990s, policymakers in Sarajevo, Pristina, and Podgorica (under Milo Đukanović) naively believed that American policy would remain unconditionally supportive of their interests. These nations certainly reaped numerous benefits during the American-led efforts to overthrow the Milošević regime and quell Greater Serbian ambitions—objectives that also aligned with countering Russia’s malign influence, from which these countries were striving to distance themselves.

Nevertheless, American diplomatic approach has already changed, which some of the political

leaders of the region hardly grasped. This change became clearer during Trump's first term (2016-2020). Various measures started to be put into place by Western ambassadors and special envoys to reverse several pillars that had been put in place by the U.S. and its allies for the last 20 years. The very fact that non-papers advocating border changes and even the idea of creating new bastion states came into view signaled a shift. These bastion states would be considered a necessary means of constraining American influence while maneuvering through the various geopolitical rivalries with China, Russia, and Iran. These nations are effectively being treated as American "contractors" for the Western Balkans, given that the eastern and southern parts of the Balkans are already members of the EU and NATO.

The U.S. appears to be striving to replicate successful models found in other parts of the globe, where it maintains a series of bilateral, semi-formal alliances to sustain a balance conducive to American national interests. In the Asia-Pacific, South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan function as strategic allies encircling China and North Korea. In Eastern Europe, Poland occupies a central role, accompanied by other Eastern European nations, while Israel and Gulf Arab states play pivotal roles in the Middle East. Several countries in the Balkans, principally Serbia and Croatia, as well as Albania, are expected to fill similar roles.

Several factors underpin the selection of these nations, reflecting American pragmatism that seeks to retain former allies while simultaneously acknowledging the influence of erstwhile adversaries. Most notably, Serbia, Croatia, and Albania each maintain significant ethnic communities beyond their borders, which position them as both potential stabilizing or destabilizing actors. The U.S. has chosen to pragmatically align with the region's power brokers, recognizing that stability in the Western Balkans hinges on the actions and influence of these nations. Seemingly, the U.S. lacks both the capacity and the desire to permit

the resurgence of conflict, particularly with ongoing geopolitical tensions regarding China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

In this context, Serbia is perceived as being pacified and courted as an ally to the U.S. Despite its historical role as a destabilizing force in the region, Serbia has managed to satisfy some of its strategic appetites through this realignment. Moves to this effect are often presented as a strategy to entice Russia away from its influence in the region—though, given the geopolitical complexities at play, this assertion may quickly prove flawed.

On a different note, Croatia, as a full member of NATO and the EU, occupies a unique position among its neighbors. This status provides Zagreb with leverage over other countries, particularly in its dealings with Bosnia and Herzegovina and its efforts to modify Electoral Law to favor the largest Bosnian Croat party, the HDZ BiH, thereby strengthening its political dominion.

This objective culminated when High Representative Christian Schmidt, a German politician close to Croatian nationalists, imposed amendments to the electoral law that effectively disenfranchised the majority Bosniak population in an apartheid-like manner, establishing the HDZ BiH as an untouchable and dominant political force. Through this intervention and substantial pressure from American diplomacy, the HDZ BiH emerged as the pivotal player in American politics in Bosnia, a trend that is likely to manifest repeatedly in the coming years.

In this environment, Serbia's position and influence in BiH has been fortified, receiving tacit approval from the international community, which has actively tolerated the separatist ambitions of Milorad Dodik within his autocratic leadership of Republika Srpska. Over recent years, Dodik's authoritarianism and systemic corruption have become increasingly overlooked, particularly as the West has sought to marginalize the Bosniaks, allowing both he and another powerful figure,

Dragan Čović, to dictate the country's political trajectory.

Serbia's growing influence was also bolstered by the recent downfall of Milo Đukanović's government in Montenegro. Despite Đukanović's partial success in steering his country toward NATO membership, which positioned him against Serbian and Russian encroachment, his administration was abruptly replaced—largely due to the perception that his policies conflicted with the new regional vision emerging from Washington.

Perhaps the most surprising development has been the changing outlook toward Pristina. Once seen as a favored ally of the U.S., Kosovo now appears to be losing ground in Washington's esteem. As Serbia's standing improves, the adverse impact on U.S. relations with Pristina becomes evident. Tensions have escalated particularly since the Kurti government opted to prioritize Kosovo's national interests over aligning with U.S. geopolitical strategies, which currently do not favor Kosovo's aspirations.

Moreover, a significant contrast emerged in the responses of Edi Rama, the Prime Minister of Albania, who, unlike Kurti, has positioned himself as a compliant ally to American directives. Rama's strategic alignment with U.S. interests has not only improved his standing but has also solidified Albania's role as a potential bastion of American foreign policy in the Balkans. In this new geopolitical arrangement, Albania is progressively becoming a focal point for American influence, reflecting trends that align with U.S. priorities.

For instance, as a gesture of loyalty Albania hosted anti-regime opposition groups from Iran, such as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), which were granted asylum during the years 2014-2016. Additionally, Islamic Community of Albania, often linked to controversial groups such as FETO, disrupts the country's relations with Turkey. Increased Israeli influence and the strengthening role of the Catholic Church in Alba-

nia further altered the country's political and ideological landscape. These factors position Albania as a critical player in formulating various policies toward Kosovo and the broader region, even affecting the Albanians in North Macedonia, where they constitute about a quarter of the population.

Is There Going to be a Change During the Second Trump Era?

Many anticipated that the arrival of Biden would halt the policy trajectory the United States had adopted in the Western Balkans under Trump. However, that did not occur. Trump's policies persisted with the same intensity. Many officials from the Trump era have continued their diplomatic roles under Biden. The flow of American funding continued unabated, leading to swift disappointment among many in Sarajevo, Pristina, and Podgorica. From 2021 to 2025, while the Biden administration conducted its foreign policy, it became evident that the direction was not merely a reflection of Trump's whims but rather a deliberate and clear course established by the U.S.

United States actively participated in the disenfranchisement of Bosniaks through Christian Schmidt, who nullified their voting rights by removing the Bosniak vice-president of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, effectively suspending the Constitution for 24 hours and installing a compliant coalition (known as Trojka in BiH) willing to accommodate the maximalist demands of the HDZ BiH. Meanwhile, in Montenegro, the U.S. quietly allowed coalitions loyal to Belgrade and Aleksandar Vučić's political agenda to unseat the pro-Montenegro Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS).

In Kosovo, increasing pressure was exerted on Kurti to acquiesce to Belgrade's demands, which included granting autonomy to the Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo, akin to the autonomy enjoyed by the Bosnian Serbs in

Republika Srpska. With every refusal from Kurti, the pressure from the U.S. intensified. A particularly alarming instance of pro-Serbian politics emerged when nearly an armed conflict broke out between Serbian militias supported by Belgrade and Kosovo police on September 24, 2023, in Banjska, located in northern Kosovo. Following this failed operation, American ambassador in Belgrade Christopher Hill sought to downplay Serbia's blatant involvement in the incident. This approach suggests that Serbia may have attempted to instigate a conflict that could compel international troops, primarily American forces, to demarcate northern Kosovo from the rest of the country, potentially paving the way for the establishment of autonomy for the Serbian municipalities—an initiative Belgrade refers to as the “Community of Serbian Municipalities.”

Considering that the most aggressive proponents of strengthening Serbian and Croatian positions in the region are individuals close to Trump, it is reasonable to conclude that this policy will persist throughout a potential second term. The fact that Trump appears more resolute in pursuing his foreign policy objectives than during his first term is particularly concerning. It seems unlikely that any change in approach will materialize, as the Serbia-Croatia axis has successfully convinced Trump's team that they are acting in self-defense against Islam in the region, positioning themselves as a bulwark for “white-Christian civilization.” Beyond ideological ties, both nations have been lobbying for years to gain favor with American policymakers.

The primary victims of this policy are the Albanians and Bosniaks—two nations predominantly Muslim and geographically situated too deep in Europe to align with the preferences of Trump and his allies. The existence of independent and internationally recognized states for both nations enhances their potential and capacities, creating further unease among right-wing elements in America. Moreover, Belgrade and Za-

greb have established connections with the European right-wing, and their close relations with Russia have been evidenced by several visits from Serbian and Croatian politicians to the Kremlin, even during the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Regrettably, the new American strategy for the Balkans appears to ultimately benefit Russian interests. Beyond merely containing Russia's malign influence, this emerging American policy seems poised to inadvertently bolster that influence in the region.

A New Diplomatic Setup for an Old Policy

Under Trump, changes are likely to occur in the diplomatic setup of the Balkans. For a second time, his administration would most likely pursue a transactional nature, where strategic partnerships supersede traditional alliances. This could open the diplomatic arena to a segmented approach where dealings with the countries in the region would be based on U.S. interests as bargaining chips for their support.

One of the most evident indicators that a substantial shift in the American approach to the Western Balkans is unlikely is the mention of Richard Grenell as a potential figure to oversee this region in the new administration. Grenell is the individual under whose oversight the diplomatic climate toward Pristina altered significantly. While serving as the Special Presidential Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations, he facilitated concessions to Belgrade that had not been previously recorded. If the new Trump administration appoints Grenell to such a position, a noticeable pivot towards Belgrade—and possibly Zagreb in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina—can be anticipated as well.

Additionally, Rod Blagojević, a politician of Serbian-American descent who served as the governor of Illinois from 2003 to 2009 and is known for his Serbian nationalist views, is being considered as a candidate for the new ambassador

in Belgrade. If happens, appointing a figure with such a profile would send a negative message to Sarajevo, Pristina, and Podgorica, signaling that the prior missteps in regional policy have not been abandoned. This appointment would likely indicate an even more radical and decisive pro-Serbian stance than that of Christopher Hill, who previously coordinated and advocated for Serbian interests during his tenure as ambassador in Belgrade. The prospect of the new ambassador being closely aligned with Serbian circles has been particularly alarming. It is clear that years of active lobbying by Serbia and Croatia in Washington have borne fruit for these two countries, allowing them, with U.S. assistance, to achieve the wartime objectives that eluded them during the 1990s with remarkable speed and minimal casualties.

Individuals close to Trump, including his son-in-law Jared Kushner, have already showcased their interest in investing in the region. It comes as little surprise that Serbia and Albania have been identified as key destinations for American investment in the Western Balkans. Plans for a Trump Tower hotel in Belgrade and luxury resorts along the Albanian coast have surfaced, further indicating that the new Trump administration is poised to continue its existing policy with renewed determination. Particularly, should Trump's personal investments flow into the region, he will have even greater motivation to reinforce the positions of the so-called bastion states, effectively enhancing Serbian, Albanian, and Croatian diplomacy and improving their negotiating power.

What is the Exit Strategy for the Unfavored?

They could diversify their partnerships toward regionally relevant powers or into possible new alliances outside the traditionally understood Western orbit. Entering new arrangements with

non-Western countries offers new opportunities for political and economic support. Given its increasing attraction and viability, this would constitute a central consideration in peace-building efforts in the region. Additionally, these states should focus on strengthening their internal governance and economic resilience, ensuring they can navigate the shifting geopolitical landscape effectively.

Moreover, what has proven lucrative in the eyes of American policymakers is the so-called blackmail policy exemplified by Serbia and Croatia. Although publicly criticized, Serbia never entirely abandoned its multi-vector foreign policy. Advocates for Serbian interests have argued that it is essential to detach Serbia from Russia and China while nurturing ties with the West. This argument became particularly resonant during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as many anticipated that American diplomacy would finally exert pressure on Serbia. Instead, the opposite occurred—Serbia was not penalized but rather rewarded. Croatia exhibited similar behavior, with Dragan Čović also engaging in visits to Moscow. American officials continued to support these nations, often sidelining Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosniak population, by granting HDZ BiH key instruments within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and at the national level. The cumulative effects of these actions point to the conclusion that it remains advantageous to leverage the potential of alternative geopolitical players to extract concessions from the U.S. This reality serves as a crucial message for countries that find themselves marginalized by the new American approach: they must actively cultivate relationships with non-Western geopolitical actors to use these connections as bargaining chips in the face of future American pressures.

A successful model for navigating American pressure can be seen in the actions of Kurti's government, which effectively diversified its

foreign policy to resist demands from Belgrade regarding the “Community of Serbian Municipalities.” By acquiring drones from Turkey, Kurti enhanced his national defense capabilities, positioning himself as a more formidable player. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, under the DPS government, did not adopt a similar approach and remained blindly tethered to the West, ultimately facing significant repercussions that led to their political downfall. Conversely, Kurti managed to endure thanks to

his serious commitment to lobbying and the expansion of diplomatic efforts worldwide to counter the detrimental influences of Serbia and the U.S. As demonstrated, lobbying, a multi-vector approach to foreign policy, and strategies for attracting American investments have proven to be crucial exit strategies in the challenging geopolitical reconfiguration shaped by Washington in the region. Especially because Trump only respects the strong and the rich.

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