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## BUILDING FOREIGN POLICY RESILIENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE CONCEPT OF COMMONWEALTH

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*Abstract:* Today, the international system is in disarray. One rarely knows who is a friend and who is a foe, and for how long. In such a conjuncture, integrating into dense institutional frameworks or alliances could be seen as the obvious thing to do. It could mean stability and anchor in a stormy world political system. But the reality could be something quite the opposite. Big and powerful countries can pretend to have bellwether foreign policy strategies. The same cannot be said of small countries, especially countries like Serbia, who are seeking to navigate in the middle lane. Here, what is required is flexibility, to be abreast of crises and stay afloat. Today's international system pushes agile foreign policy systems to seek shelter under practical and functional concepts and methods which provide leeway and latitude. Most importantly, they are looking for accommodation of both divergence and cooperation under an ethic of equality. For this reason, it is my opinion that the value of the "commonwealth" as a concept should be re-assessed and made more adaptable for today's foreign policy needs. Loose systems of associations will have the advantage of keeping channels of communication open and, at the same time, preserve the much cherished national sovereignty. For countries like Serbia, the system of the commonwealth would allow for the maximisation of national control over its destiny and preserve its resilience.

*Keywords:* Non-binding commonwealths, Western Triple Axiom, Triple lock-down system, Overdependence, Co-dominance, straitjacket agreements, neutrality, structural lee-way, genius loci.

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## THE CONCEPTS AND MODALITIES OF THE COMMONWEALTH AND THE WESTERN TRIPLE AXIOM (WTA)

### The Commonwealth

Commonwealth as a concept is a means of managing change in international relations in a non-coercive manner. There has to be a constant appraisal of these instruments and a hierarchy set. It is thought that Cicero, the great Roman statesman said: 'No form of commonwealth is ever maintained for very long.' (Zetzel, 1999, p. 30). Change and adaptation are the only constants. 'One of the great strengths of the Commonwealth as an organisation is its manifest ability to adapt to its environment.' (Groom, 1984, p. 294). According to A.J.R. Groom the: '... four functions are: a capacity to adapt to the social and physical environment as a coherent unit; the ability to integrate sub-units; a sense of identity; and sufficient self-knowledge to enable goals to be set.' (Groom, 1984, p. 294). Commonwealths could be built at different levels and managed in a devolved manner. The basic characteristic is that it has to be proactive but non-constraining to the participants: 'It is not overtly coercive and its structures are not oppressive. It brings a sense of community into the struggle to control coercion and dismantle oppressive world structures.' (Groom, 1984, p. 303). In terms of perception, commonwealths are very advantageous because they are not perceived as formal alliances put together against someone or some specific threat. And therefore, they act as complementary instruments for traditional strategic and foreign policy elaboration.

Inside a commonwealth framework, one can choose the level and intensity of cooperation and, at the same time, concentrate on the coordination aspect of the forum or grouping. On a practical side, the economics of the commonwealth structure is also extremely attractive for countries that have few resources but would like nonetheless to maintain strong international visibility. Staying on the practical side, '... compared with the UN, the Commonwealth is speedier in its processes because of the absence of a constitution or elaborate rules...' (Groom, 1984, pp. 302-303). The commonwealth as a concept also provides greater flexibility and adaptability, '... all of which stem from habits built up consensually, and relate to a penchant for flexibility and diversity' (Groom, 1984, p. 294). In this manner, the commonwealth could act as an ante-chamber for an alliance, if the complete trust is established fully.

The greatest strength of the Commonwealth as a concept is that it is not geared to forcible integration nor loyalty. Instead, it allows for the natural

growth of both, and thus attains greater resilience and sustainability (Groom, 1984, p. 295). These positive characteristics could be greatly incremented by the establishment of a Secretariat that is: ‘... not too strong but competent, flexible and efficient, can be a device for facilitating consensus and acting as a barometer and bridge transregionally, between official and unofficial...’ (Groom, 1984, p. 303). As a working concept, therefore, the commonwealth provides much-needed fluidity in negotiations.

### **The Western Triple Axiom (WTA)/Co-dominance/Co-gérance**

What does one mean by the Western Triple Axiom? The Collins English Language Dictionary describes an axiom as a statement or idea which people accept as being true. For the last 70 years, there was one phenomenon, called the West, which most Europeans thought to be the natural aspiration of everyone. Worldwide, the West is a cultural phenomenon, which is very diffused and impalpable and almost a cliché. But in Continental Europe, it is real, tangible and omnipresent, and it is not perceived in the same way in Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Seen from an Eastern European perspective, it can be defined as the Western Triple Axiom (WTA) or three layers of control: the first is the blanket control by the military power of NATO, the predominant economic power of the European Union and finally the over-arching industrial power of Germany. However, there is a twist to this. On the surface, it looks like a blanket dominance of the US. But at a closer look, it is, at least for the moment, a co-dominance of both the US and Germany. And as Britain leaves the European Union, France gets industrially marginalized and German preponderance becomes overwhelming. This was long anticipated: ‘With the increasing significance of frameworks of cooperation and integration, like NATO, the OSCE, the European Union and the G7/G8 summits, this civilianization is now functionally more intensive than it ever has been. With the democratization of Southern Europe ... Eastern Europe, it is also geographically more extensive’ (Tewes, 2002, p. 3).

This is the repetition of structures of world integration. From the 1880s onwards, there was no doubt that both Germany and the United States, who had no large-scale empires, were the main organizers of the world economy (van Dijk, 2015, pp. 177-199). They systematically created the conditions for the disintegration of all other spheres. The First and the Second World Wars decided who would be the leader of the tandem and who would play second fiddle. With ups and downs, and periods of lapses, this collaboration

has continued to expand and prosper. They always had common enemies and ambitions, and never really saw each other as enemies but rather as accommodating contenders keen to work out the modalities of co-dominance (Kagan, 2019). Another way of seeing the European integration would be to see it as a *co-gérance* (meaning co-tutelage or co-management, a French term) of their industrial integration of lesser nations.

The way it was done in Central and Eastern Europe, after the collapse of communism, was by the disruption of local economic sovereignty and self-sufficiency. They prioritized certain sectors in a rational and organizational logic that gave preponderance to *co-gérance* (Wandel, 2010, p. 141). As whole swathes of industrial sectors were closed or delocalized to China, revenues fell sharply, giving rise to household debt and the consequent financial integration under *co-gérance*. In the final act, *co-gérance* then rations industrial/economic capacity to the integrated territories (member states), creating permanent dependency. In Europe, the US has modelled *co-gérance* by giving Germany economic predominance but denying it any viable form of military self-sufficiency. After 9/11 and the war on terrorism meant that the security dimension of American influence over Europe and especially Germany increased, forcing all relations to obey the law of integration and central control (Aldrich, 2004, pp. 732-733). From this perspective, *co-gérance* means overall integrative control remains the privilege of the US, while the day-to-day integration becomes the responsibility of Germany. Some in the CEE do not see this in a favourable light, instead preferring *co-gérance* between China and Germany, hoping that the integrative process would be a little more disengaging. But none have taken the decisive step to promote this model for the moment.

All the reason why the concept of the Commonwealth should be considered, not as an alternative to the integrative dynamic of the Western Triple Axiom or *Co-gérance* but as a strategy to find foreign policy leeway, a breathing space, autonomy and an insurance policy, is to counter the excesses or failures of this unstoppable integrative dynamic. The concept of the Commonwealth provides a repository of initiatives that should not annoy *co-gérance*. The following case studies will go on to illustrating these conceptual formulations. In an ad hoc manner, I chose Japan to show the dangers of over integration and its apparent inability to find an autonomous foreign policy initiative. As an alternative model, I use Hungary to illustrate how a relatively small country, at the core of the integrative dynamic, has successfully established a breathing space in its foreign policy initiatives and created a high degree of sovereign centrality.

## THE CASE STUDY OF JAPANESE AND HUNGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY STRUCTURES

With a GDP close to 5 trillion USD, compared to Serbia's 50 billion USD, Japan obviously has enormous economic resources at its disposal. But does this mean it has a foreign policy that can defend its national interests at various levels? In spite of all its wealth and industrial expertise, Japan is considered a foreign policy dwarf, unable to articulate its priorities in the regional and global domains. During the Cold-war period, Japan was lulled into a dependency on the United States for most of its foreign policy requirements. But the same dependency started to become an impediment after the collapse of the Soviet Union with a huge price tag attached to it. During the First Gulf-war, Japan was forced to pay an astronomical 13 billion USD (Funabashi, 1991, p. 59).

The deep bilateral retrenchment looked like a strong shield with a rational and reasonable US foreign policy but this had a disastrous side-effect of shielding off Japan from having its own homegrown foreign policy, oriented towards neutralism: 'The very conditions under which Japan achieved her independence involved her in a firm alliance with the United States and in a commitment to certain important aspects of American Far Eastern policy...' (Morris, 1960, p. 9). After describing the situation as a precarious abyss, Yoichi Funabashi states that: 'Overdependence on its bilateral relationship with the United States undermined Japan's creative diplomacy by closing off avenues to other foreign policy initiatives... Regionalism was seen as both bad politics and bad economics.' (Funabashi, 1991, pp. 62- 63). Defeated in the war and locked into a 'protected alliance' with the United States, Japan did not try to create alternatives for itself, nor did it contribute to creating an environment that would loosen great-power dominance: '... Japan has seldom tried to present itself as a rule-maker in the world community. The rules were already there. Japan simply tried to adapt to them and, if possible, excel at playing the game' (Funabashi, 1991, p. 60). And since the 1990s, this handicap has not been systemically and systematically addressed.

Japan desperately lacks the instruments of delivery for its influence, regionally and globally. And it is notably struggling to establish visibility and grappling with the possibility of slipping down the hierarchy in the way it is viewed by the outside world, from a power to be reckoned with to a power that does not count. In my opinion, the main problem for Japan is that most of the avenues it tries to build are adjoined to the main boulevard of its bilateral relations with the United States of America, bogged-down by

the straightjacket of the American model alliance and cooperation. Once one enters this relationship, it is extremely difficult to disentangle oneself from it without provoking a collapse in a very important relationship. This could come when Japan accommodates its foreign policy to the democratic wishes of its people rather than the '*gaiatsu*' politics or '*outside influence*' (Funabashi, 1991, p. 73). Japan is not alone in this.

In a similar fashion, Hungary, a Central European country, is accommodating with an EU-NATO-German '*triple lock-down system*'. But its approach to regaining control of its foreign policy destiny looks much more creative and successful, without upsetting anyone. Before joining the EU, the 'three goals of Hungarian foreign policy in 1990 were a transatlantic orientation, regional stability and support for Hungarians in neighbouring countries.' (Hoebink, 2010, p. 195). With the EU membership, these priorities were disturbed because the EU has its own priorities that it would like to superimpose over the national levels. This makes Hungarians weary of outside control. In 2010 the Hungarian people gave a clear indication that they wanted a fundamental change. There was pressure to signal a new departure that would guarantee greater '*manoeuvrability*' or '*articulation*' of national desires of a '*genius loci*'. There is also a desire to build alternatives to reduce the overall dependency on outside instances. What will happen if the WTA weakens or simply collapses? Big countries can rescue themselves, but small resource-restrained countries will be devastated. They will be faced with an arduous process of extraction, similar to Brexit, and an uphill task of rebuilding their foreign policy priorities. A good example of this is the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. S. Frederick Starr, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, treats the whole of Central Asia as a clean slate, where any big power can sketch its own design; simply because these countries did not have their own foreign policy design. (Starr, 2005, pp. 164-167). Countries in the ex-USSR struggled for decades to build-up credible and workable foreign policy structures. From this point of view, *straightjacket agreements* and deeply *entrenched arrangements* are very disadvantageous for small countries. Talking about the aftermath effects of Brexit on the broader European affairs, David Keys in *The Independent Online* wrote the following: 'It will further increase the economic centrality of Germany, accentuate differences between France and Germany and increase divisions between southern and northern Europe. What's more, divisions within the EU (and potential post-Brexit economic and strategic tensions between the EU and the US (and between the EU and Turkey) could very well also weaken NATO' (Keys, 2019). Any responsible government should prepare for all eventualities.

To avoid uncertainties, Hungary has endeavoured to construct or strengthen existing *commonwealths* at various levels and in concentric circles in a very rational manner, just in case the EU and NATO commitments were to weaken. It has to avoid institutional bonds that would irritate the Triple Axiom, but it could enter *commonwealth arrangements*. It systematically tried to reinforce its foreign policy resilience. Projecting one's reputation in the international arena is considered vital in the rehabilitation of a country's status. (Crescenzi et al., 2012, p. 261). The first step it took was to strengthen the relations between itself and its community outside its immediate borders in a very peaceful and constructive manner – giving support for educational improvements. One has to be acquainted with the fact that, during the 1945-1990 period, many Hungarian communities living outside the immediate borders were systematically weakened (A. R., 1947, pp. 125-127). And even Hungary under communism did not redress the situation (Deme, 1998, p. 308). The second step was to strengthen the Visegrad Four forum to align the economic and political interests of the Central European segment of its immediate geopolitical neighbourhood. The third step was to extend this framework to encapsulate the whole of the Central and Eastern European region (CEE) with the 17+1 formation. In this forum, Hungary is mainly seeking greater manoeuvrability and harmonization so that the region could empower itself economically without undergoing a process of *constraining integration* similar to that proposed by the WTA. The idea is that the stronger the region becomes economically, the more resilient each CEE member becomes. The fourth step is the realisation that the economic and geopolitical importance of the Turkic Sphere of nations is increasing, and it could present Hungary with inter-regional advantages. It is for this reason that Hungary became an observer member of the Turkic Council and has now decided to become a full member of it ('Hungary provides state scholarships for more than 700 students from the states of the Turkic Council' (Government of Hungary portal, 2019)). This policy coincides with that of the Eastern Partnership proposed by the EU. A win-win situation for everyone. Finally, the fifth step is to entice global outreach. Hungary is neither a leading economic and financial power nor a leader in specialised technologies the world is desperate for. Therefore, it has to find other means to reach out to the larger world. Being predominantly a Christian country, Hungary has decided to make the defence of Christianity as one of its priorities. For this purpose, it is in the process of building a loose commonwealth of global diversity, as a peaceful consultative forum (Government of Hungary portal, 2019). All the above are not alliances but *commonwealth initiatives* that are giving a structural leeway and meaning to the Hungarian foreign policy

without imposing any constraints upon it. In this way, Hungary can stay globally visible and connected, whatever happens with the *WTA* or segments of it.

What is missing, however, is commonwealths that would include Austria, the Balkans, and Romania. Although Austria, Hungary and Romania are in the European Union, there is not enough coordination to create a similar framework as the *V4*. And the Balkans region as a whole is too eclectic for any meaningful and rational grouping. That said, a solution could be achieved in both cases, through a Lower Danube commonwealth grouping. This would have the advantage of remaining outside *WTA*, and at the same time, bringing together Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. Currently, the European Union has initiated a Danube Region, which is part of the *WTA* integration dynamic - it has its privileged place. The purpose of the Lower Danube commonwealth that I am proposing would be a looser association that would deepen understanding between the members and set regional or sub-regional priorities. The first and foremost priority of the Lower Danube Commonwealth would be to create regional economic cooperation and complementarity, and also put in place a strategy for infrastructures that make this easier. It is possible that in the future ideological commonwealths in the fields of radical or expansive conservatism could be created to make Hungary more connected, especially with a post-Brexit Britain.

### **SERBIA AND THE PROSPECTS FOR GREATER FOREIGN POLICY RESILIENCE**

Serbia has lost its primacy in the Balkans, and with that has lost control of the prime levers of its domestic and foreign policy. The cornerstone of its preponderance in regional affairs and its significance came from its high degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency; it had acquired a remarkable status and an enviable position in international affairs. Even the mighty powers thought of befriending it rather than offending it, let alone attacking it. And a quarter of a century since the demise of the Yugoslav federal structure, Serbia has difficulty in moving away from its isolation and reformulating a durable foreign policy in order to regain its previous status.

During these last twenty-five years, it was deprived of all the opportunities provided by globalisation while she is now confronted with the uncertainties created by this very globalisation. Unable to rebuild itself as needed, it is pushed into a resource-retrained phrase of world



development, where a lack of diplomatic and foreign policy integration can become a structural impediment. My argument is that to attain resilience, both in domestic and foreign policy domains, small countries like Serbia have to maintain active cooperative networks. Whatever perspective we look at, Serbia seems to be at a crossroads and a crucial moment in its diplomatic and foreign policy choices. The first thing for Serbia to do is to identify core constituencies, domains and interests, both short and long-term. It has then to map out and highlight elements that can strengthen its resilience over time. These domains and commonwealths could be: 1. Diasporic Commonwealth; 2. Heritage Commonwealth; 3. Geopolitical Commonwealth; 4. Knowledge Commonwealth.

### **1. Diasporic Commonwealth**

Since the demise of Yugoslavia, many Serbian communities are scattered across the Balkans. And over the centuries, the need to remain culturally and spiritually attached to their home country has meant that a dynamic Serbian diaspora has been established. As a foreign policy domain, the diaspora is central for its resilience. The current Serbian state method of managing relations with the diaspora became legalistic and institutional with the passing of a comprehensive law in 2006, which came into effect in 2009, called 'Law on Diaspora and Serbs in the Region'. It is a very praiseworthy initiative and it is a very logical move by the Serbian state given the fact that 'remittances' by the diaspora constituted 8.6% of the GDP in 2018, according to the World Bank (2018). But this approach has a few weaknesses. By wanting to have institutional control over the diaspora, Serbia risks isolating some of them and even make them hostages to eventual conflicts or tensions between Serbia and the host country. The recent experience between Turkey and its diaspora in Germany is a good illustration of this risk, i.e., straightjacket systems do not work (Vidino, 2019). What is needed is a system of commonwealths, where the initiative comes from each specific community, and the Serbian state helps in the coordination of these desires.

### **2. Heritage Commonwealth**

Historically, before Europe was plagued by petty nationalisms, the Balkans, the Carpathian Basin and the Black Basin were one big melting pot. There was a free flow of people, cultures and goods. Historic heritage sites of one nation can be found several hundred kilometres inside the

neighbouring country. In terms of religious and cultural heritage, the same patterns can be observed, orthodox tradition dominates the region, closely followed by the Ottoman and the Catholic traditions. For thousands of years, it was a region with inter-ethnic conflicts. But these negative experiences are only one aspect of the region, a facet that is overblown by competitive national discomfiture. And it also represents a unique richness in terms of natural beauty, culinary diversity, and architectural extravagance. The region also overlaps that of the Danube River Basin. What is more, for most of the countries in this region, intra-regional trade represents more than 50% of their trade. For Serbia, it is around 40% (Observatory, 2018). Given these undeniable positive attributes, a commonwealth can be formed as a bedrock for further enhancements, mainly of infrastructures for a variety of needs like trade, tourism, research and development, and educational facilities.

### **3. Geopolitical Commonwealth**

Serbia has wisely decided to declare itself a neutral country, but this might not be enough: 'Alternatives are of no value if they do not have a clear purpose that motivates abandoning existing concepts' (Agrell, 1984, p. 159). The West would like to see Serbia distance itself from Russia before taking its neutrality seriously. The relationship with Russia is complex, and it is more than a relationship of interests, it is deep-rooted and civilizational. Both the EU and NATO are powerful straightjackets and would aim to squash Serbian neutrality in the bud. To balance the situation or make it more palpable, Serbia has to find solutions that would guarantee its neutral status; thus, it would avoid entering into formal alliances. The best option for its neutrality to prosper would be to reduce tensions by adopting mechanisms of conflict prevention. There is no conflict prevention and conflict resolution forum in the region. A commonwealth dealing with regional security and peaceful resolution of conflicts is very urgently needed. Who better than a neutral Serbia to take the initiative to organise such a forum?

### **4. Knowledge Commonwealth**

Serbia is faced with serious problems attracting and retaining talent. As its population ages, it will need high value-added jobs to maintain its state-functions, its welfare system and pay for the modernization of its economy. The flow of talent and a qualified labour force would be key to its future

success, and integration at the upper end of the world economic hierarchy. The current strategy of the advanced countries has been to monopolise talent and thus have control over the highest-yielding form of capital. Leading countries like the United States pick and select researchers and create despotic exclusivity in terms of research capacity and sharing of the results (Selvaratnam, 1988, p. 52). This is going to create knowledge aridification as the most qualified researchers are plucked, and new research is restricted in countries of departure. Serbia can benefit massively by setting a new trend. Serbia could promote development by creating a pool of knowledge catered for underdeveloped countries. Because what is supported by WTA, is its own development (Selvaratnam, 1988, p. 59). And most importantly Serbia can stop and reverse the brain-drain. The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) is a good example of this. It was created as a 'regional intergovernmental organization established in 1965 among governments of Southeast Asian countries to promote regional cooperation in education, science and culture in the region.' (seameo.org). With the SEAMEO framework, there exists the Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (RIHED). Commonwealth forums are created for specific research or educational programs and financed in an ad hoc manner. Serbia should consider creating similar regional and inter-regional, non-binding commonwealths.

## CONCLUSION

A small country with a small economic capacity does not always mean it is devoid of foreign policy options. Serbia is indeed in a special and highly delicate position because it is surrounded by contending military alliances in an acutely sensitive geopolitical region. The burden of foreign policy construction is further complicated by its newly acquired status of neutrality. A fundamentally new approach is needed to find appropriate policy instruments. My idea for proposing these commonwealths was to meet four basic needs for Serbia's foreign policy. Firstly, to protect Serbia's new-found neutral status. Secondly, to give greater foreign policy visibility at various levels. Thirdly, to provide an affordable foreign policy framework. And finally, it should provide flexibility and manoeuvrability, allowing for adaptability in an ever-changing world. I am not saying the concept of the commonwealth will suffice, but it could certainly be parallel support to rely on in times of crisis and confront periodic systemic upheavals. As A.J.R. Groom said of the Commonwealth: 'The world could survive without it, but not as well' (Groom, 1984, p. 303).

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