

THE BALKANS AS A TRANSITIONAL REGION BETWEEN INTERNAL CIRCLES AND GLOBAL SQUARINGS IN THE PARADIGM OF HYBRID POWER

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Abstract: The Balkan geopolitical conundrum lends itself well to being represented by the vain effort of squaring a circle. The article responds to this challenge by proposing a theory of the Balkans as a *transitional region*. Conflict dynamics within its western flank are analysed, highlighting their substantial circularity. It also considers attempts by global geopolitical actors to square the Balkan circle. In order to get out of the so-called *sovereignty labyrinth*, which shackles both internal and external actors to the absoluteness of a legal principle, the peculiarities of the transitional region point the way to the *governance function*. The amphibious image with which this form of power can be represented reveals its essentially hybrid nature, which is an alternative to both the terrestrial character of the *Juridical* and the maritime character of the *Economic*. This makes governance a paradigm of the *Political* that proves to be more suited than ever to the precisely hybrid modes of conflict in contemporary geopolitics.

Keywords: Geopolitics; Balkans; Squaring Circles; Transitional Region; Hybrid Power.

Introduction

The Balkan political space constitutes a veritable geopolitical conundrum, which lends itself well to being represented by the vain effort, worthy of a Sisyphus, of *squaring a circle*. In this paper, we intend to take up this intellectual challenge by proposing a theory of the Balkans as a *transitional region*.

The transition we are talking about is profoundly politico-geographical and is essentially that between two juxtaposed *great spaces*, the Western or European space and the Eurasian or Russian space. However, in such a context, windows of opportunity open up for the geopolitical action of even

distant actors, such as China. Moreover, the spatial transition finds itself fuelled by the temporal one, since the current phase of *geopolitical disorder*¹ finds in the Western Balkans a potential place for the reconfiguration of global geopolitical balances, as it is already happening for Ukraine and Palestine and could happen for the South China Sea.

For these reasons, the current research has focused precisely on the western flank of the Balkans, an area that, despite its modest demographic and economic size, derives its geopolitical significance exactly from its intermediate position.

Resuming the evocative image of squaring the circle, our contribution will start with an analysis of the dynamics of conflict within this area, grasping its substantial *circularity*. Indeed, the various actors that oppose each other end up going around in circles in the so-called *labyrinth of sovereignty* (Barbaro, 2023), since each one wants to impose on the other an ultimate power over the territory, each one resorting to the same, aforementioned, legal principle.

The fragmentation of the Balkan political space, on the other hand, cannot but attract the competition of global geopolitical actors for control over it; this, in turn, acts back upon this very fragmentation, further exacerbating it in the short term. In this sense, it is clear how the complexity of such dynamics can be reduced by recognising the mutual interdependencies between scales that constitute *transcendence*. It is within this framework that the attempts by these actors to square the Balkan circle are analysed.

However, paradoxically, if it is true that in the short run such geopolitical *squarings* fuel Balkan disintegration, in the long term they necessarily imply, for functional reasons, the prospect of a recomposition of the regional political and economic space. The consequent problem of whether to conceive such a space as fragmented or cohesive, while on the one hand it resides in the realm of spatial ontologies, on the other hand suggests obvious and pressing strategic implications. In both dimensions of the discourse, we believe that it is inescapable to understand the nature of the Balkans in terms, precisely, of a transitional region.

The *amphibious* characteristics of such a geopolitical context cannot help but make it fertile ground for forms of competition and conflict based on the paradigm of hybrid warfare, among which those related to information strongly emerge. Therefore, in a global geopolitical context marked by strong *pleiocrity* (Barbaro, 2020), and all the more so for a transitional region, it is appropriate to ask whether it is necessary to break out of the

labyrinth of sovereignty and imagine equally hybrid and amphibious forms of power in space.

The internal circles of the Balkan political space

To test the arduous task of squaring the circle of the Western Balkans, one must first try to understand what this circle is and what its peculiarities are. The current geopolitical dynamics of the region have their roots in the disintegration process of the Yugoslav State, which erupted in the 1990s in the aftermath of the implosion of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolarity that had governed the international order during the Cold War.

“Between 1991 and 2001, several independent states emerged from the ashes of Yugoslavia, whose territorial delimitations were the result of a series of wars fought between their respective national components. All this took place under the eye of the United Nations and in an area contiguous to that of the newly formed European Union” (Barbaro, 2023). This dramatic course of events, as we have argued, should be viewed through the lens of separatist phenomena.

Several factors had made it possible for almost half a century to maintain State unity: Josip Broz Tito’s strong leadership; the break with the USSR starting in 1948 and the consequent development of a socialist model *with Yugoslav characteristics*, specifically a *self-management type*, i.e., based on workers’ involvement in the management of enterprises, but with a moderate openness towards the Western bloc and the free market; a non-aligned foreign policy, a model for which the country assumed a leading role internationally; and a federal system that allowed internal particularist pressures to be dampened for a long time.

After Tito’s death in 1980, the decline of the national economy and the change in the international order facilitated the emergence of nationalist leaderships and the explosion of ethnic tensions that had long remained latent. The separatist-driven conflict dynamic that led to the dissolution of Yugoslavia was not, as in the more typical scheme, vertical: the Federal State had already collapsed and had no margins to oppose the independentist actors. On the contrary, it was horizontal: nationalists from different ethnic groups opposed each other. On the other hand, what was typical of the separatist problem and what gave a *circularity* to those conflicts was the fact that each of the actors involved conducted their battle by referring to the same legal principle. The result was that they all found themselves in what we call the *labyrinth of sovereignty*. In the absence of a *restraining* power on

the superordinate scale of the Federal State, which can be effectively depicted with the Pauline image of the *katechon*, the fire could only have spread. After all, if the source of legitimacy is the same, every action can only be countered by an equally legitimate reaction (Barbaro, 2023).

However, one should not fall into the determinist temptation to believe that such internal conflicts constitute an unavoidable necessity for the Balkan space. Indeed, in the course of history, this region has also known long phases of cohesion guaranteed by the domination of external powers, from the Roman to the Ottoman and the Byzantine empires. This gives rise to a whole debate on whether the Balkans should be regarded as a region endowed with unity and coherence or, on the contrary, as little more than a representation of a fragmented and incoherent space (Todorova, 1997; Dragovi-Soso, 2002; Lampe, 2006; Glenny, 2012).

What we wish to emphasise here, however, is that the action of external powers within an intermediate space such as the Balkans contributes in its own right to the circularity of its political dynamics. Indeed, in a context of competition for the acquisition of influence, the region's fragmentation constitutes a vulnerability that makes it easier and more attractive to access it. In turn, the actors involved will not hesitate to further exacerbate the latter in order to gain competitive advantages. In the long run, however, in a scenario of achieved hegemony, any power would rather need to reverse the trend and give again some homogeneity to the controlled space. And this for functional and security-related reasons, not dissimilar to those that had induced Captain Francesco Bertoni (1930) first and then the Institute of Maritime Warfare in Livorno (Ramoino, 1999) later to identify the unity of the Enlarged Mediterranean in the problem of guaranteeing the continuity of communication flows. Exerting influence to take advantage of fragmentation and exacerbating fragmentation to achieve further influence, making use of hegemony to strengthen homogeneity, and bolstering homogeneity to consolidate hegemony – in short, it is evident how external powers are also an active part of the circular dynamics within the Balkan region.

The geopolitical squarings of global actors

Come to think of it, it is possible to say that in the Balkans, the function of *katechon*, not fulfilled by an already dissolved superordinate state power, has in a certain sense been taken over by the actors of global stature that have intervened in the region. As we have said, on the one hand, they have tactically played and are still playing with the dynamics of fragmentation

to gain competitive advantages in terms of penetration and influence; on the other hand, however, strategically, they are the bearers of long-term plans that functionally imply a recomposition of the Balkan space in the name of cohesion and coherence. This clearly defines the ultimate meaning of the attempts by the various actors to square the Balkan circle.

The United Nations may perhaps not be considered an accomplished geopolitical actor since it has neither the will nor the means to control political spaces and impose its order there. However, it can certainly be understood as an agency of meaning that promotes discourses of power functional to others' geopolitical projects. This is the case with the *responsibility to protect* (R2P), a doctrine that lays the conceptual foundations to support so-called humanitarian interventions, which are framed around a perspective of relief in defence of fundamental rights.

Even before their formalisation, the principles at the origin of R2P provided a discursive platform for the US intervention strategy in the Balkans, which was materialised through the mediation of NATO. The latter enabled the US to act directly on the ground with strong international legitimacy, as it did in the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (later leading the Dayton Accords process in 1995) and in Kosovo in 1999. To avert the threat of the area's sliding into the Russian orbit, Washington's strategy has been attempting to imprint the Balkan space with a turn in the direction of Western sovereignty paradigms to foster the process of its *Euro-Atlantic* integration.

This entailed, after NATO's diplomatic-military mediation, entrusting the political initiative to the European Union as the most ideal space to incorporate the region for reasons of geopolitical coherence and geoeconomic functionality. In interpreting this role, Brussels has pursued its enlargement strategy to the Western Balkans by equipping itself with a general legal framework for the accession processes, with schemes of agreement with the individual countries concerned and concrete instruments to support development and structural reforms. Counting on the attractiveness of becoming a Member State, the EU binds this possibility through forms of marked conditionality, mainly concerning compliance with its regulatory standards. The risk arising from this is that of wrongly calculating the balance of costs and benefits as perceived by the countries concerned, ending up not being able to cope with the competition of those who, as we will see, propose unconditional investments.

The European Union's potential strength lies in offering the prospect of an adaptive politico-economic integration based on multi-level governance

and a diffuse and asymmetric distribution of powers—in a word, a *hybrid* integration. The realisation of that potential and the implementation of this prospect, however, are subordinated by Brussels to a paradoxical condition: the fossilisation of a territorial configuration based on sovereignty, considered definitive despite the vitality of factors that could lead to future reconfigurations. Thus, for example, in the context of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, the EU would demand the crystallisation of the status quo enshrined in the declaration of Kosovo's independence and UN protectorate in 2008.

The mentioned case study is particularly significant. Serbia continues to exercise the pivotal role it has historically played in the region, due to its central position within the Balkan Peninsula and as a place of transition between the West and East. This gives it the two-faced aspect of a possible bridge or wall within the area as well as between the European and Russian space. Moscow is today closer to Belgrade than it was during the Cold War, after the break-up between Yugoslavia and the USSR. Its decision not to recognise the statehood of Kosovo, where, along with the historical core of the Serbian nation, its most important religious sites are located, is part of a broader strategy of revitalising the cultural ties that have their heart in the common Christian-Orthodox identity. In this regard, energy and infrastructure initiatives are more of a functional lever to strengthen it, but the ultimate goal of the Russian space remains to counter the European one in the region. What is more indicative, however, in the case of Serbia is that any external attempt at geopolitical *squaring* can only revolve around the circularities of the internal dynamics of the Balkan region, and this is perhaps the clearest example of how the different scales condition each other, *merging* into the coils of *transcality*.

China is a global actor that differs significantly from the others in this respect. For it, the Balkans is not an end but a means. Consistent with its *centripetal imperialism* (Marconi, Barbaro, 2021), Beijing has no interest in encroaching on the Balkan space to impose its order there; rather, it aims to make use of the region's transitional properties to bring together the maritime and land components of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as exemplified by the railway that should connect Piraeus to Budapest via Belgrade. Along this route, the opportunity is propitious to make further investments and to bolster its global geopolitical legitimacy by resorting to the weapons of *soft power*.

In conclusion, we will only mention Turkey. It is not a global player, and, at the time of writing, it does not have the specific weight to dictate the

region's order on its own; however, still mindful of the Ottoman past when it was able to do so, it maximises its presence there through diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations. Similarly to what Russia did with the Orthodox peoples, Ankara proposes itself as a point of reference for all Muslims in the area.

Transitionality and hybrid power

Efforts to square the circle of the Balkans by global actors, who are also locked in the conceptual labyrinth of sovereignty, seem destined to remain the vain exercise of a jurist, Sisyphus.

Indeed, Carl Schmitt, while proclaiming his distance from geographers, did not contemplate a *Nomos* in which the *Ordnung* (order determination) would not reflect the *Ortung* (place determination), thereby revealing a profound geographical sensitivity (Schmitt, 1950). In other words, paraphrasing the German scholar's thought, a politico-juridical superstructure makes sense and is effective if it reflects the spatial configuration of a political structure. The juridical principle of sovereignty, by its very intrinsic absoluteness, thus proves to be concretely unrealisable and ineffective for the appropriation and stabilisation of such a complex and problematic political space.

In the name of this principle, the internal actors make that space fragmented, while the external actors make it the object of a desire too dangerous to be pushed to its extreme consequences because it would entail a head-on clash between two large spaces. This is exactly what is happening in Ukraine: proof of the consequences brought by the declaration, from both sides, of *Ordnungen* not corresponding to any mature and factual *Ortung*.

The myth of Sisyphus himself, as reinterpreted by Albert Camus, comes in handy in suggesting perhaps the best attitude to get out of this painful condition. The Greek hero, condemned by the gods to push a rock to the top of a mountain only to see it roll down into the valley and repeat the torture *ad infinitum*, symbolises the struggle of human beings – both as individuals and as a collective body – against a destiny from which they can only redeem themselves by recognising and accepting the absurdity of this very struggle. It is then necessary, in the words of the French writer, to find a way to “imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus, 1942).

This adaptive effort, in our case, translates into the renunciation of the pretence of playing the sovereignty card as the instrument resolving every territorial problem, all the more so in a politico-geographical context in

which it has already proven to have counterproductive and paradoxical effects. If the puzzle is geopolitical, the solution must not be merely legal but geopolitical as well.

For our part, the first step is to make a theoretical contribution to a deeper understanding of the peculiarities of the Balkan political space, overcoming the trivialising unitary/fragmented dichotomy. If the circular dynamics of internal conflicts tell us a story of disintegration, the squarings attempted by the external geopolitical actors need functional homogeneity from a future perspective. How do we defuse this short circuit?

Our proposal is to grasp, along with all its implications, the transitional nature of the Balkan region. In order to do so, however, one must first understand what transitional nature consists of. In this regard, a traditional theoretical tool in the history of classical geopolitical thought, and especially German geopolitical thought, namely the concept of *large spaces*, is particularly useful. Friedrich Ratzel had already formulated the idea that political communities, as well as those of living species in general, have their own *living space* (*Lebensraum*), which is dynamic, in which to realise their existence (Ratzel, 1897; 1901). Karl Haushofer took up this vision and made it his own, envisaging its explication in *pan-regions* (*Panregionen*) of continental dimensions constructed from *pan-ideas* (*Panideen*), i.e., general ideologies of spatial organisation (Haushofer, 1931). In a similar vein, Carl Schmitt repeatedly prefigured an overcoming of the international order based on nation-states in favour of a new order based on *large spaces* (*Großräume*) led by hegemonic centres (Schmitt, 1940; 1941; 1950).

Between hegemonic political spaces such as the *Großräume*, there can certainly be a variety of *intermediate spaces* – a concept that is quite generic in itself, so much so that it has known various interpretations within geopolitical thought. Among these, the first is defined by the expression *cordon sanitaire*, a biopolitical metaphor adopted by the geopolitical lexicon to indicate a zone established to isolate and contain a rival power. An emblematic historical example is represented by Eastern Europe: the little states that arose from the disintegration of the continental imperial powers following the Great War were considered and employed by Western forces to circumscribe Germany and the Soviet Union, just as the USSR itself, after the Second World War and during the Cold War, made them its satellites to defend and distance its borders from the West (Parker, 1985). Similar phenomena have been analysed, with greater specificity, in relation to the scale and function of the area under consideration. Thus, a single country established or sustained in order to oppose an adversary space is called a

buffer state (*État-tampon*). Similarly, a protected border area, often by demilitarising it, is called a *band-tampon*. Both were instruments used by France between the two world wars to defend its eastern borders and contain German pressure (Korinman, 1990). Finally, although the literature has sometimes focused on their intermediate position (Spykman, 1944; Fazal, 2007) and other times on their conflict-mitigating effect (Chay, Ross, 1986; Buzan, Wæver, 2003), a peculiar trait of neutrality (Mathisen, 1971; Partem, 1983; Menon, Snyder, 2017) has often been attributed to the broader concept of *buffer zones*.

Clearly, such conceptualisations prove unsatisfactory when put to the test in a geopolitical context such as the Balkans: some are fossilised on the state form or a local scale; many of them on the subordination of the area to one of the hegemonic political spaces between which it is placed; others, on the other hand, postulate their neutrality, functional to the mitigation of the conflict.

The concept of *transitional region*, which we propose here, is intended to shift the focus from the self-referential strategies of external actors to the relational and transcalar peculiarities of the political space under consideration, first and foremost accounting for its complexity. Indeed, the Balkans, as we have observed, is the object of the attempted squarings of global politics; however, these are grafted into a context that, as we have argued, exhibits a complex political and cultural identity. The countries of the Balkan area, moreover, give rise to a spatiality made coherent by common dynamics; ultimately, paradoxically, we could say that they are united by their fragmentation circle. Such a geopolitical landscape seems to make linear evolutions such as the assumption of a status of perfect neutrality or a territorial reconfiguration marked by a rigid application of the sovereignty principle — from the recomposition into a unitary state to the exclusive subjection of the region within a hegemonic space — unlikely. As follows from our arguments, an outcome of stabilisation of the area can only pass through an exit from the labyrinth of sovereignty. This does not mean, as should be clarified, the denial of this principle, which remains the foundation of the international law doctrine, but rather to recognise that it is illusory to believe it to be a panacea for the territorial problems of such complex contexts.

We must then shift our attention from the superstructural element of the *Juridical* to the structural element of the *Political*. In this sense, we take up our dialectical theorisation of the spatial forms of power (Barbaro, 2023). On the one hand, the terrestrial power localised by Halford John Mackinder

(1904) in the *Heartland* and brought back by Jean Gottman (1952) to the model of the *polis*, already praised by Plato (1907) in its Spartan realisation devoted to the value of security, and on the other hand, the maritime power extolled by Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890) and hypostatised by Gottman in the *Alexandrian system*, were almost foreshadowed by Aristotle (1831) in contrasting the need for security with that of openness to opportunity. We can therefore affirm that on the one hand, *telluric* power is substantiated in the sedimentation of political culture until it crystallises into the *Juridical*, while on the other hand, *thalassic* power feeds on circulation and exchange, assuming the liquid form of the *Economic*.

The need therefore arises to find, between the two dialectical extremes, a synthesis that recovers a sense proper to the *Political*. Our proposal (Barbaro, 2023) is to identify this third way in the *function of governance*, a realisable manifestation of power that, if on the one hand does not passively resign itself to the incontinence of the *Economic*, on the other does not fall into the arrogance of the *Juridical*. Instead of letting events happen or claiming to determine them, governance assigns to itself the function of diverting their course and affecting them as far as possible to realise the ends of the political community. Neither terrestrial nor maritime, power will rather be *amphibious*; if we were to assign the image of a geopolitical environment to it as well, it would be Nicholas John Spykman's *Rimland* (1944).

The amphibious metaphor of governance reveals, by immediate consonance, its essentially *hybrid* nature, and it also corresponds to both the spatial characteristics of transitional regions and the dynamic traits of political actions that, although now spread globally, find a specific application. The contestability of these areas and, at the same time, the inappropriateness of military confrontation, apart from the dramatic exceptions we are witnessing, facilitate the new modalities of an undeclared but permanent and unlimited war. Conventional conflict, even if avoided, is not excluded, but it is accompanied by the most varied forms of competition, involving the entire political space. The contextually high levels of competition and interdependence generate the paradox of a "structural state of emergency", or *pleiocriticality* (Barbaro, 2020).

One of the most strategic elements is information, since the function of governance, "somewhere between art and technique as well as "wisdom" and work" (Barbaro, 2023), finds in information the essential resource to reduce the complexity of the context and act effectively on it (Barbaro, 2021). It is no coincidence that espionage and disinformation establish themselves

as the weapons par excellence to be turned against the entire body of political communities.

As a corollary to our theoretical discourse, we will limit ourselves to pointing out a comparative case with counterintuitive and seemingly contradictory findings, so much so as to take on a suggestive chiasmus form. According to what has been said, one might expect Russia to have difficulty exerting an effective influence on the Balkans since the spatial configuration of its power is profoundly terrestrial and sovereignty-related, marked by a strong domination of the centre over the peripheries. Instead, its ability to exploit its cultural influence on the region is decisively enhanced by a marked inclination towards hybrid conflict modes. On the other hand, in the prospect of co-opting the Balkan countries into its political space, the European Union is advantaged by its vocation for an exercise of governance in asymmetrical and diffuse forms, but at the same time it is hampered by its tendency towards rigid normativism. Far from constituting an aporia, this framework seems to confirm a recurring tension between the sedimentation of the respective spatial configurations and the drive, conscious or otherwise, to compensate for them if not to overcome them (Barbaro, 2021).

Conclusions

If the Balkan situation is a puzzle, it is at least as much so for the actors involved in it, in their play on the ground, as it is for geopolitical scholars bent on their papers. This is because, in geopolitics as well as in the most common *divertissements*, the solutions one is tempted to give in the immediate instance are often the crudest and almost always reflect the biases ingrained in the minds of those who engage in them.

The actors within the Balkan political space and the prime agents of its proverbial fragmentation have undertaken and still conduct their territorial reconfiguration strategies by opposing each other in the name of the same irreducible legal principle of sovereignty. An instrument that each wields from its side, like the end of a rope that is tugged fiercely on both sides, but without anyone moving an inch.

Balkan dynamics are circular because every sovereignty claim can only trigger other equal and opposite claims, but also because they simultaneously attract and are fuelled by competition between global geopolitical actors.

Everyone finds opportunities and conditions favourable to their strategic interests there. Even physically distant political actors, such as China, can seize a window of opportunity and carry out political and economic penetration. In this way, Beijing can insinuate itself like a wedge into Southeastern Europe and connect the BRI's maritime belt and land road. But the highest stakes are those generated by the confrontation between the two great spaces surrounding the Balkans: on the one hand, the European West, and on the other, Russian Eurasia. In projecting their spheres of influence, one and the other cannot help but conceive of their grip on space as exclusive and their game as zero-sum. The cone of shadow that is denied on the level of ideas but actually produced by their overlapping makes the area a place of potential disorder and possible reconfiguration of the global geopolitical order.

The Balkan circle may not be square, but the whys and wherefores of its peculiar geopolitical dynamics can only be understood if we grasp the nature of this space as a transitional region. As such, it will not be able to find its stability in its partitioning between the two great spaces, and even less so in its appropriation by one of the two with the illusion of enclosing it in the labyrinth of sovereignty. In this sense, while Russia nominally keeps a federal order and shows a strong inclination towards hybrid power, the fact remains that its territorial configuration, as also revealed by its geopolitical and military action, is radically geared towards the domination of the centre over the peripheries. On the contrary, the factually multilevel order of the European Union and the diffuse distribution of power in its political space, albeit with many contradictions, open up the possibility of a *light* and *flexible* entry of the Balkan region within it.

It is worth pointing out, however, that in this hypothesis, the rules of engagement are quite challenging for everyone since they imply, on the one hand, the adaptation of the Balkan region to European political paradigms and, on the other, the preservation of its cultural and economic proximity to *other* spaces. Similarly, the ability to manage internal conflicts with equal versatility is required as well. Why, for instance, not consider the possibility of an extraterritorial status for Serbian sacred sites on Kosovar soil? This further set of challenges is nothing but a corollary of the spatial and temporal transitionality we have discussed, calling into question the need for an *amphibious* governance function in the same way as the conflict dimension falls within the hybrid power paradigm.

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