

## SERBIA'S SECURITY RELATIONS WITH THE EU AND CHINA IN THE EVOLVING INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract:** Serbia's foreign policy relies on simultaneously developing positive relations with key global actors, including the EU, the US, Russia, and China. This approach has been designated as a four-pillar foreign policy, a semi-official stance of the country's leadership for the last decade and a half, regardless of the political faction in power. The EU is a traditionally important actor because Serbia aspires to become a member of the Union. Additionally, the role of the EU is crucial due to its status as the leading economic partner for Serbia and its role in the facilitation of the Belgrade-Priština dialogue. On the other hand, the Serbia-China partnership has been constantly on the rise. The significance of the relations Belgrade has been developing with Beijing is growing, and the role of China as a partner in the economic and increasingly in the security and political spheres cannot be neglected as well. This paper aims to offer a retrospective on the relations of Serbia with these two key partners, the EU and China, mainly focusing on the security sphere, the domain where the relations have been developing at a slower but consistent pace. It will explore how these relations with both actors are affected by evolving global circumstances, given that the security area is particularly vulnerable to the changes stemming from the increasingly divergent positions of the dominant global players in the international system.

**Keywords:** Serbia, China, EU, four-pillar foreign policy, security, international system.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since 2008, Serbia has been pursuing a foreign policy that aims to develop positive relationships with major global powers, including the European Union (EU), the United States (US), Russia, and China (Đukanović & Lađevac, 2009). These four powers are seen as the four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy. This policy has, in its essence, remained consistent even when the political parties leading the government changed in 2012. The EU is particularly important to Serbia due to the country's aspirations to join the Union, its status as Serbia's leading economic partner, and its role in facilitating the Belgrade-Priština dialogue. Serbia applied for EU membership in 2009. In 2012, the European Council granted Serbia official candidate status for EU membership, and in 2014, the negotiations officially started. As part of Serbia's negotiation process for EU accession, security and defence are important aspects within Cluster 6—External Relations and, more concretely, Chapter 31—Foreign, Security and Defence Policy that is its core part. However, this cluster remains unopened. Meanwhile, Serbia's partnership with China has been steadily growing, mainly through projects within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China in 2013. The increasing importance of Belgrade's relationship with Beijing has extended beyond economic ties to include significant developments in other areas, including security.

The article will explore the evolution of security relations between Serbia and its two main partners, the EU and China, charting their development in the context of the changing relations at the level of the international system, with a focus on the events of the past decade. Given the highly sensitive aspect of security relations and their interlinkage with the issues of national interest, national security, and national defence, every important shift in the balance of power at the systemic level can affect the position of small countries such as Serbia. Hence, Belgrade's relations with Brussels and Beijing in this area are particularly dependent on the rising instability that characterises the international environment. This instability is the manifestation of the multipolarisation process of the international system. This trend is characterised by increased competition and cooperation among major powers, including the US, the EU, Russia, and China, as well as the emergence of regional actors with growing economic and military capabilities, such as Iran or India. The multipolarisation process creates a more complex,

dynamic, and unpredictable global landscape that fosters opportunities and challenges for smaller actors.

Accordingly, the article will be divided into two parts. The first part will sketch the major changes in the international environment and evolving positions of leading powers that represent Serbia's four pillars of foreign policy, namely the EU, the US, Russia, and China. The second part explores relations between Serbia and the EU and Serbia and China in the security sphere, highlighting the main areas of cooperation. In the conclusion, we will show how the changes in the international environment impact these relations.

### **EVOLVING INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL SETTING**

The constant changes in the power dynamics between key international players have been evident at the level of the international system for the last decade and a half. The undisputed dominance of the United States, a hallmark of the post-Cold War period, has been slowly but steadily diminishing, giving way to the rise of other actors with their own visions and goals. Speaking in relative terms, the power the US wields is still unprecedented and cannot be directly opposed by any other actor individually. However, the US is re-examining its role on the international stage while simultaneously working on maintaining its vital interests in several different geographical areas. Additionally, as the US's crucial partner, the EU has faced several crises, from the departure of the United Kingdom and the migration crisis to the response to the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, resurgent Russia and its ambitions to re-establish its role as a relevant great power, the rising China's ambitions of achieving a status and position in the international system that correspond to its capabilities, as well as the problems posed by smaller states such as Iran and North Korea refusing to conform to the expectations and modalities of behaviour promoted by the US-led world order, all present a clear challenge for Washington, Brussels, and the leading capitals of the EU countries. Furthermore, the reliance on non-traditional and non-military forms of power is increasing (Vuletić & Đorđević, 2022). All these different elements of the multipolarisation process of the international system contribute to a much less predictable and unstable international environment.

The United States embraced its position as the sole remaining superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The US shaped the world

order according to its intentions for the following two decades. Still, decision-makers in Washington have been reluctant for the US to become a world hegemon that imposes its will on other actors primarily through conquest with an application of overwhelming military and economic force. Instead, they have attempted to form wider coalitions, gather international public support, and invoke international law as the foundation for their actions. The US was an important factor in conflict resolutions in the cases of the Balkans and Northern Ireland (Nedić, 2021). Nevertheless, when unanimous support for its initiatives was lacking, Washington still acted as it wanted, as demonstrated by the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Generally, the reliance on economic cooperation and inclusion in multilateral organisations such as the World Trade Organisation was intended to neutralise antagonistic relations with former great power rivals. The expansion of NATO was a tool to strengthen relations with new allies and achieve security interests in Europe. Regime change was used as a strategy aimed at smaller countries deemed adversaries (Mearsheimer, 2018; Walt, 2018). However, the steady rise of opposition to this US-led world order across the globe coincided with a re-evaluation of American national interests and priorities within the US itself. The rise of Donald Trump and his “America First” approach showcases an alternative understanding of the role the US should have and builds on previous discussions within the country on vital American interests and viable strategies for their achievement (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016; Posen, 2015). During his presidency, Trump favoured focusing on internal development and economic protectionism while internationally insisting that the burden of international security be shared more equally with allies, particularly those in Europe. Additionally, his administration consistently emphasised that the country should concentrate its energy and strength on addressing its most dangerous rising rival, China (Turner & Kaarbo, 2022). The alternative viewpoint, exemplified by the administration of Joe Biden, while remaining committed to countering China, finds that one of key American interests is to resist Russia’s actions in Ukraine and place much more focus on relations with crucial allies (Biden, 2020; Brands, 2021; Simić & Živojinović, 2021; Shifrinson & Wertheim, 2021).

That second approach is complementary to the role leading decision-makers in Europe see for the US today. The EU spent the better part of the first decade of the 21st century in a positive momentum of deepening integration and cooperation between member states on the one hand and

important achievements in the enlargement process that led to the accession of 12 new countries to the EU on the other. The 2008 economic crisis was the first of several that have impacted, influenced, and reshaped the EU in the following years. These included the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the most recent crisis stemming from the consequences of the war in Ukraine. The EU, however, managed to evolve and continues to exist after each of these crises, although with some important negative ramifications, of which the stagnation of the enlargement process is one of the most significant and impactful (Petrović, 2019). In terms of its common foreign and security policy, the EU has seen ambiguous stances relating to the US due to the constant ambition for the Union to become more strategically autonomous while at the same time lacking the organisational structure and will to commit resources for that to happen (Bergmann, 2024; Howorth, 2019). In that regard, the war in Ukraine has, in the eyes of European leaders, reinforced the need for the American presence in Europe while also leading to a complete breakdown of relations with Moscow and forcing EU countries to prioritise security and defence when considering policy options.

For Russia, its experience during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shaped its goals and actions in the next. With President Vladimir Putin, Russia gained a leader who sought to restore the international status and respect the country had during the Soviet Union era. The prevailing sentiment in Moscow was that it was not treated fairly by Western powers, and its interests, warnings, and red lines were not taken seriously enough (Lukyanov, 2016). Divergence in positions on key international issues and different interpretations of crucial national interests gradually increased and culminated with the developments in Ukraine in 2014, which led to the Russian annexation of Crimea (Jović-Lazić & Lađevac 2018). That was a turning point after which Moscow openly shifted towards promoting its own vision of the world, focusing more on spheres of influence, sovereignty, and transactional relations between great powers. It also started to seek alternative long-term partners who shared similar grievances with the West. Interpretations and analyses of Russian motives for the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are diverse and numerous (Götz & Staun, 2022; Mälksoo, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2022), but regardless of which we ascribe to, the complete dissolution of relations with the US and EU has further reinforced Russia's commitment to work with these alternative partners. In its quest to assert its

great power status, Moscow relies mainly on its partnership with China in several key areas. For Putin, as he stated during his visit to Beijing in May 2024, Sino-Russian “cooperation in international matters is one of the stabilising factors in the international arena” (Bala, 2024). One of the most important elements of this cooperation is an attempt to create a viable alternative to Western institutions and organisations through the de-dollarisation process and the evolution of BRICS (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2021; Lukin, 2021). Still, its future status and influence in the international system are closely tied to the results and outcomes of the war in Ukraine.

China is the second country seen by the US and Western Powers as a main challenger to the current world order. Unlike Russia, it has a much more favourable economic and political position, allowing Beijing to act more carefully and in accordance with its long-term goals without sacrificing the benefits of its current status and integration into the current system. China’s posture towards the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific has become much more aggressive since President Xi Jinping came to power (Liu, 2020). The crucial role of this region as a transportation hub make it strategically important for China. Beijing attempts to build its international position as a great power involved in global issues after a long period of focusing on internal development and disregarding wider issues. However, the history and experience of local actors in the Indo-Pacific with China make them prone to rely on security ties with the US as a counterbalance against Beijing (Nedić, 2022). On the economic front, complex initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, aimed at offering economic gains and development opportunities as alternatives to the pathways offered by Washington or Brussels, have proved much more successful since numerous countries were eager to benefit from them (Zakić & Radišić, 2019). The BRI relies on enhancing cooperation and connectivity among participating countries, which increases its attractiveness (Đorđević & Stekić, 2022). China’s economic strength and integration into the global economy and value chains mean its potential ostracization would impose unacceptable costs for all actors. Thus, it remains a significant economic partner to the US and EU countries. Expanding from the economy, the broad visions for the future presented through the Global Economic Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative are further steps in China’s attempts to assert its role on the world stage (Stekić & Mitić). They are especially well received in countries in Africa and the Middle East (Babić, 2024; Wu, 2023), where the strengthening of

economic ties is accompanied by a careful and deliberate increase in Chinese diplomatic efforts and initiatives, thus expanding Beijing's influence in regions where local actors have a much less negative history with China than with Western powers.

The Middle East exemplifies the potential of smaller and regional powers to impact the status and stability of the international system. Iran has remained an important player due to its regional significance, power, and influence. Its rivalry for regional supremacy with Saudi Arabia on the one hand and its adversarial relations with Israel on the other, combined with its nuclear programme, means that to accomplish anything in the region, Tehran cannot be bypassed (Стојановић, 2022). One such accomplishment was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a nuclear deal the US and the EU agreed with Iran in 2015, even though it soon collapsed due to the US withdrawal (Robinson, 2023). More recently, China made a breakthrough in March 2023 by negotiating the restoration of full-fledged diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Hafezi, Abdallah & El Yaakoubi, 2023). However, the region has plunged back into chaos with the Israel-Hamas war that started in October 2023, highlighting the overall instability and proneness to new battlegrounds and crises in the current international environment. These regional conflicts and hotspots, combined with the rising great powers' competition, create a complex context that impacts relationships between major powers and smaller countries like Serbia. That is particularly evident in the security domain.

## **SERBIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE EU AND CHINA IN THE SECURITY DOMAIN**

### **Cooperation with the EU**

One of Serbia's primary strategic goals is to become a member of the European Union (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, n.d.b.; Đukanović & Lađevac, 2009). As such, cooperation with the EU as a whole, within the framework of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and cooperation with individual member states in areas of security and defence are immensely important. In some aspects, this partnership overlaps with Serbia's cooperation with NATO, as 23 of 27 EU member states are also part of the alliance. The cooperation in this field is becoming increasingly relevant, given the impact of the war in Ukraine and the issue of security in Europe.

The crucial role of the EU is also recognised in Serbia's formal documents. In the Defence Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, adopted by the National Assembly in 2019, one of the key elements of the defence policy is listed as "the improvement of national security and defence through the process of European integration" (National Security Strategy, 2019). Still, cooperation in the domain of security and defence is developed in accordance with Serbia's policy of military neutrality. This concept was first introduced by the National Assembly Resolution in 2007, primarily indicating that Serbia would not join any military alliance. It was strengthened by being officially reconfirmed in the National Security and National Defence Strategies in 2019 (National Defence Strategy, 2019; National Security Strategy, 2019). Still, Serbia's commitment to its military neutrality does not impede its aspirations to develop close security and defence ties both with the EU as an organisation and its individual members.

One of the leading modalities of partnership with the EU in the security sphere is the participation of members of the Serbian Armed Forces in EU-led military missions. For Serbia, this improves the capabilities and international experience of its armed forces, strengthens its diplomatic relations with the EU, underscores its commitment to international peace and security, and bolsters its international standing. The Serbian Army is currently participating in three multinational operations of the EU with 17 members: EUTM Somalia (6 members), EUNAVFOR Somalia–Operation ATALANTA (4 members), and EUTM RCA (7 members) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, n.d.a.). Serbia also participated in EUTM Mali, which was suspended in 2022 and officially ended its mandate in 2024. As a complementary engagement in addition to military missions, Serbia has shown interest in participating in civilian CSDP missions as well. The main stumbling block was the inadequate Serbian legal framework that prevented the engagement of civilians in such missions (Velimirović, 2021). However, the new Law on Participation of Civilians in International Peacekeeping Missions and Operations Outside the Borders of the Republic of Serbia was adopted in 2023, opening the space for such activities in the future. That represents a significant milestone since "participation in EU civilian missions is an area in which Serbia showed its interest before the start of accession negotiations in 2014" (Velimirović, 2021, p. 2).



The second important strand of cooperation is through participation in activities and organisational structures within the framework of the CSDP. In December 2013, Serbian Defence Minister Nebojša Rodić and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, Catherine Ashton, signed an administrative cooperation agreement between the Ministry of Defence and the European Defence Agency (EDA) (Ministry of Defence, 2013). The EDA focuses on assisting the EU member states in improving defence capabilities in crisis management, enhancing their interoperability, boosting defence spending planning, and facilitating European defence innovation. EDA Chief Executive Claude-France Arnould visited Serbia in 2014, as well as his successor Jorge Domecq in 2016 (Zakić et al., 2024, pp. 41-43). Additionally, Serbia is an active member of the HELBROC EU Battlegroup, which consists of troops from Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine. EU Battlegroups are multinational military units that form the backbone of the EU's military rapid reaction capacity to respond to crises and conflicts. The Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted the Conclusion on Accession to the EU Battlegroup Concept in 2015. In 2017, the note of Serbia's accession was signed by representatives of all members of the Battlegroup (Ministry of Defence, n.d.). Serbia has thus officially become a member of the HELBROC Battlegroup, participating with a military police platoon, a civilian and military cooperation team, and up to five staff officers in the battlegroup command.

In addition to its partnership with the EU as an organisation, Serbia has been committed to developing relations in the security and defence area with individual EU member states. This cooperation mainly involves regular bilateral visits and dialogue. These included official visits to Serbia by French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parley in 2019, Italian Minister of Defence Lorenzo Guerini in 2020 and 2022, Slovakian Minister of Defence Jaroslav Nad' and Austrian Minister of Defence Klaudia Tanner in 2021, and German Minister of Defence Christine Lambrecht in 2022 (Zakić et al., 2024, pp. 44-47). At a more technical level, the Serbian Ministry of Defence has regularly signed and implemented Bilateral Military Cooperation Plans with numerous EU countries, including Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden (Zakić et al., 2024, pp. 40-44). Serbia's commitment to deepening security and defence relations with individual EU member states highlights its strategic efforts to engage more directly with key European countries in these areas.

The multilateral aspect of cooperation with EU countries has primarily been realised through joint military exercises that contribute to the interoperability of the participating armies. These exercises have been principally organised by the United States European Command, most notably the “Combined Resolve” exercises held in Germany in which the Serbian Armed Forces have participated since 2012. Their last participation was in “Combined Resolve 16” in 2021 (Serbian Armed Forces, 2021) due to a moratorium declared by the Government of Serbia on joint military exercises with foreign partners following the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Still, there are some exceptions. The 2023 edition of the “Platinum Wolf,” the largest international joint military exercise held in Serbia since 2014, saw participation from around 600 troops from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Hungary, Romania, the US, North Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia, despite the existing moratorium (Ministry of Defence, 2023). The official explanation points to Serbia’s obligations within its participation in multilateral operations (Cvetković, 2023), but the move also shows the importance of relations with these partners for Serbia.

### Cooperation with China

With China’s ambition to take a larger role on the international stage, first and most directly manifested with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, a significant number of countries around the world became interested in developing cooperation with Beijing and benefiting from it (Đorđević & Lađevac, 2016). For Serbia, which has emerged as one of China’s leading partners in Europe (Лађевац, 2018), alongside Hungary, this partnership has primarily focused on large infrastructure projects and the procurement of favourable loans from China. The scope and intensity of this relationship have been consistently growing, which is reflected in closer political ties, including the personal relationship between the two presidents, Xi Jinping and Aleksandar Vučić, and China’s support for Serbia’s stance on the Kosovo and Metohija issue. President Xi’s visit to Serbia in May 2024, one of only three countries he visited on a mini-European tour that also included France and Hungary, is a testament to the strength of these relations. During his visit, President Xi stated: “Serbia became China’s first strategic partner in central and eastern Europe eight years ago, and it becomes the first European country with which we shall build a community with a shared future” (Filipovic & Sito-Sucic, 2024). The culmination

of this growing closeness between Beijing and Belgrade was the signing of the Free Trade Agreement between Serbia and China in 2023, which came into force in July 2024. It is expected that this agreement will have a significant impact on trade between the two countries (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Furthermore, the cooperation has begun to extend into other areas, including security and defence.

One of the leading and most publicly visible strands of increasing cooperation between China and Serbia in the security area is the arms trade and Chinese donations to the Serbian Armed Forces. A particularly important arms trade deal was for the CH-92A armed drones, delivered to Serbia in June 2020. Besides fulfilling its primary function of upgrading Serbia's military arsenal, this transaction includes the technology transfer aspect crucial for Serbia's own Pegasus drone project development (Vuksanovic, 2021). Additionally, after its semi-formal announcement in 2021, the CH-95 drone, which is larger and more advanced compared to the previously acquired CH-92As, was showcased in April 2023 during the demonstration of the capabilities of the Serbian Armed Forces, codenamed "Granite 2023" (Topalović, 2023). The most significant purchase, however, was the FK-3 air defence system. It was acquired in 2019 and shown for the first time during the Shield 2022 military power demonstration at Batajnica Air Base in April 2022 (Vuksanovic, 2022). This system now constitutes a crucial part of Serbia's arsenal and is the result of a long-term effort by the Serbian Armed Forces to modernise the country's defence systems. The strong relationship with China has also been demonstrated through various donations to the Serbian Armed Forces, including 24 non-combat lifeboats for rescuing people from flooded areas and 30 GPS devices in 2016, as well as 40 assets such as self-propelled engineering machines, motor vehicles, integral transport means, and special vehicles in 2019 (Zakić et al., 2024, pp. 59-61).

The second strand of cooperation is the intensifying relationship between Serbian and Chinese police forces. In September 2019, joint police patrols of Serbian and Chinese officers were established in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Smederevo, selected as preferred destinations of the steadily increasing number of Chinese tourists to Serbia and their significance within the Belt and Road Initiative projects. This programme saw a second batch of patrols begin in September 2023 in the same cities (Beta, 2019a; The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2023). Furthermore, in November 2019, Serbian and

Chinese police forces held joint anti-terror drills in Smederevo at the steel plant owned by Chinese HBIS Group Serbia. The drill, attended by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the Ambassador of the PRC to Serbia, Chen Bo, involved 180 police force members, 20 vehicles, and three helicopters (The President, 2019). However, the project that has garnered the most public attention and is potentially most impactful relates to surveillance within the Safe City project, realised in partnership with Huawei. This initiative included the installation of over 1,000 cameras in more than 800 locations across Serbia's capital by the end of 2020 (Beta, 2019b). The details, including confirmation of Huawei's involvement, are not publicly available due to their confidential status, but the project has faced criticism for its lack of transparency and potential violations of personal data and privacy rights of citizens (Božić Krainčanić, 2019; Vuksanovic, 2019). Nevertheless, it highlights Serbia's reliance on China and Chinese companies as major partners not only in military and external security matters but also in internal security issues as well.

The importance both sides ascribe to each other is demonstrated through high-level visits and meetings that have produced significant results. One of the first indications of the focus on security cooperation as a major aspect of Serbia-China relations was the meeting between the Chinese President's Special Envoy and Secretary of the Central Commission for Political and Legal Affairs, Meng Jianzhu, and Serbian Interior Minister, Nebojša Stefanović, in Belgrade in September 2017. During this meeting, they discussed "how to improve the security situation and the cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia" (B92, 2017). In 2019, Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission General Zhang Youxia led a PRC delegation on a visit to Serbia, where they met with Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin and Chief of General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces General Milan Mojsilović. In March 2021, President Aleksandar Vučić met with Chinese State Councillor and Minister of National Defence Wei Fenghe during his visit to Serbia. During his stay, Minister Wei Fenghe also met with Minister of Defence Nebojša Stefanović. In 2023, Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, met with Serbian Minister of Defence Miloš Vučević in Beijing during the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (Zakić et al., 2024, pp. 60-62). These visits show constant communication and contact on the highest level between political leaders of the two countries. They represent an important aspect that played a part in the realisation of concrete elements of cooperation previously mentioned,

including military equipment purchases and joint police actions. Furthermore, this regular frequency of high-level contacts significantly contributes to the strengthening of security ties between the two countries.

## CONCLUSION

As part of its four-pillar foreign policy, Serbia has cultivated relationships in the security area with both the EU and China. Regarding the EU, the main results of cooperation have been achieved as part of Serbia's EU accession process and include close working relations with the EDA, participation in the EU-led military missions, and military exercises with EU member states. On the other hand, cooperation with China has been characterised by the procurement of military equipment, including major defence systems, a partnership in the development of Serbia's police surveillance systems, and an increasing focus on the security domain in high-level contacts. However, there is a growing divergence between the major powers that represent these four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy, which is a part of the process of multipolarisation in the international system. Although the scope and outcome of this process are not clear, this shift signals a move towards several opposing centres of power, albeit uneven in terms of strength, resources, and capabilities. These developments pose new challenges for Serbian foreign policy. The tolerance and understanding of Belgrade's key partners for its attempts to strengthen relations with opposing sides are decreasing. Openly conflicting stances on crucial international issues and differing expectations from major powers create a narrower space for Serbian decision-makers to manoeuvre.

These effects are especially evident in the security sphere, which is very sensitive and reactive. Serbia's decision to introduce a moratorium on joint military exercises with foreign partners has impacted the development of interoperability with major partners from the European Union. Nonetheless, with the adoption of a law allowing Serbian citizens to participate in EU CSDP civil missions, positive signals were sent. Furthermore, Serbia has been under tremendous pressure as a result of the disintegration of relations between Russia and the West, which has resulted in a reduction of security ties with Moscow and the cancellation of the S-300 air defence system acquisition. This situation has prompted Serbia to seek alternative partners, resulting in the acquisition of an equivalent system from China. These and other moves

related to security and defence are perceived by Serbia's major partners as signs of its potential further alignment and are considered within the broader context of increasing polarisation in the international environment. The space for cooperation with opposing sides becomes narrower. Thus, Serbia's deepening ties with either EU countries or China are carefully calibrated and often followed by attempts to provide a balancing act with the other side to avoid being perceived as choosing a definite side. Still, as tensions between key international actors are expected to grow as the multipolarisation process continues, Serbia will find itself in an increasingly challenging position to maintain its level of cooperation with the EU and China in this area. In order to keep or improve the existing level of ties with both partners, skilled manoeuvring will be required.

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