

SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY PERSPECTIVES AMID THE UNITED STATES' AND THE EUROPEAN UNION'S STRATEGIC REPOSITIONING

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Abstract: Donald Trump's second term stirred up the international balance of power, which is gradually moving towards multipolarity. Additionally, the war in Ukraine galvanised the EU to take up a more decisive role in the international arena and strengthen its security. Having this context in mind, small states find themselves in a position to carefully consider the implications and impact of the new circumstances and attempt to formulate a foreign policy approach that can help them successfully navigate the unpredictable and turbulent strategic environment that is emerging. Among them is Serbia, an EU membership candidate pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy and burdened by the issue of sovereignty and territorial integrity in Kosovo and Metohija. Considering the evolving trajectories of both the US' and the EU's foreign policy amid changes in the international context, and their implications for US-Serbia and EU-Serbia relations, Belgrade's strategic alignment may come under pressure to be reconsidered in response to the new circumstances. Therefore, this article explores Serbia's relations with these two actors, its foreign policy perspectives and sets out three scenarios for its future orientation.

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INTRODUCTION***

The turbulent changes in the international politics we are witnessing since Donald J. Trump returned to the White House are in part stemming from his unique approach to foreign policy and specific understanding of the United States' (US) national interests. At the same time, they reflect long-term processes driven by many factors, with Trump's personality and role being only one of them. These processes are interlinked with the fundamental shifts in balance of power and power distribution between major actors, which leads towards a more multipolar world. The gradual move toward a multipolar world presents both challenges and opportunities, depending on one's perspective. Regardless of perspective, this transformation involves serious growing pains, reflected in numerous crises and disruptions. They are reflected in regional clashes and conflicts that are erupting over the world, involving both great and small powers alike, the gradual decline of importance of norms and values of the liberal international order, as well as the self-questioning in the leading superpower, the US, about its global role.

At the same time, the European Union's (EU) decades-long aim to be a reputable global actor has been coupled with a challenge so serious that the EU's then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), Joseph Borrell (European Commission [EC], 2024e), had called it an 'existential threat to Europe'; Russian-Ukrainian war has shaken the EU. This conflict reshuffled EU's priorities, spending and policies; the enlargement was awakened having gained a new geostrategic importance, the EU's agenda changed putting the war in Ukraine at the top of its priorities list, and a new impetus for further developing EU defence has

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emerged. While assisting Ukraine financially, in arms and training, the EU has been intensively investing in its own defence and proposing a series of white books and legislation to further strengthen its military capabilities, while staying under the umbrella of NATO. However, with Trump's second term, new concerns about the future of NATO, outcomes of major conflicts and crises, and EU-US relations came about.

Having this context in mind, Serbia, as other small states, finds itself in a position to carefully consider implications and impact of the new circumstances, and attempt to formulate a foreign policy approach that can successfully navigate the unpredictable and turbulent environment. The article traces these changes and presents possible scenarios for Serbia's strategic path forward. Accordingly, the article is divided into five parts. The first part sets out the Serbian four-pillar foreign policy, the second concerns the US' and EU's strategic repositioning as two prominent features of the new global context. The third and fourth parts offer a review of the EU-Serbia and US-Serbia relations, highlighting major events, processes and issues as a lead-up to the fifth part that considers Serbian strategic options. This final part outlines three ideal-type scenarios, including their main drivers and consequences, and is followed by a conclusion.

SERBIAN MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY

From isolation and sanctions, to opening and rebuilding ties with the great powers and returning to international institutions, Serbia's foreign policy course changed during the last three decades. In the 2000s, Serbia's main foreign policy goals were European integration, stability in the region, regulation of relations with Montenegro, first within the same state union, then as separate countries. In 2008, the issue of Kosovo's¹ unilaterally declared independence gained greater international significance, although Serbia relied predominantly on Russian support for this matter even before. In this regard, Serbian foreign policy goals in the late 2000s included strengthening relations with Russia and China. In addition to

¹ All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood to be in the context of United Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

these two UN Security Council members, this period marks Serbia proclaiming reestablishment and improvement of relations with the US, but also with other countries, such as India, as some of its foreign policy goals. Moreover, Serbian Parliament (Народна скупштина Републике Србије, 2007) declared military neutrality towards any existing military alliance in 2007², but the country participates in UN and EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) missions and is cooperating with NATO at the highest level military neutrality allows, while also being an observer to Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) since 2013. With this non-traditional military neutrality, participation in missions is one of the ways Serbia balances between its often incompatible interests and makes up for the lack of cooperation, for example in CFSP.

Serbia has kept multi-vector foreign policy relying on four main pillars – the EU, Russia, China and the US – ever since. In addition, it seeks to enhance cooperation with Turkey, the UAE, and other actors, especially countries that do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state. When it comes to the four great powers, the basis for the relations Serbia builds with them differs. In case of the EU, both sides emphasise shared values and political and socio-economic benefits of the European integration path of Serbia. Not only is the EU the largest investor in Serbia, but Serbia is the third largest EU investment recipient worldwide (OECD, 2025). Moreover, the Union, as a bloc, is the biggest trading partner of Serbia, despite China having increased its share in Serbian trade (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia [SORS], 2025a; SORS, 2025b³). Nevertheless, neither side always acts in accordance with the proclaimed shared values and goals towards each other. Serbian officials often criticise the EU, while the EU does not apply enlargement conditionality consistently. More than ever, after February 24, 2022, the relations between Serbia and the EU became evidently strategic: Serbia aligned with the EU values and *acquis* means more secure and stable EU. On the other hand, Russia uses its cooperation with Serbia to prevent further expansion of NATO.

² Military neutrality was later articulated in strategic documents on defence and national security in 2009 and their revision in 2019.

³ Data updated on July 15, 2025 and retrieved on July 27.

When analysing the relations of Serbia and the EU, the EU's institutional system has to be taken into account. Member states play important role in this system and shape the direction of European integration through the European Council and Council of the EU. Therefore, it is worth mentioning the relations Serbia has with some of the members. First, five EU members – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain – do not recognise Kosovo as independent, which disables the Union to potentially act in a way that is completely contrary to the national interests of Serbia. Second, Hungary and, more recently, Slovakia, developed good relations with Serbia, especially at the personal level of their leaders – Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, and Prime Ministers Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico – who share similar stances on Russia. Therefore, these two member states act as strong advocates for EU membership, despite the unsatisfactory level of reforms in Serbia. Third, cooperation with France is worth mentioning. The two countries share historic ties and after cooling due to the French involvement in NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), relations have been strengthened in the past decade and are based on economics and culture, but in 2024, they signed a contract with Serbia to purchase twelve Rafale fighter jets worth EUR 2.7 billion. French President Emmanuel Macron described this acquisition as a 'strategic change' (Le Monde, 2024) as it would align Serbia more closely with the EU and most likely replace Russian MiG-29s, thus drawing Serbia away from Russia.

In case of Russia and China, the main incentives for cooperation are unresolved and disputed territorial issues and national interests. Cooperation with Russia is often portrayed and justified as historical connection of 'brotherly peoples', sharing Orthodox Christianity, and its most prominent dimension is the energy sector and military cooperation. On the other hand, China's strong presence in Serbia is predominantly connected to trade and grand infrastructure projects as part of its Belt and Road initiative. The US-Serbia cooperation mostly focuses on trade, especially in information technologies. Still, the US mainly shows interest for Serbia and the region when it aligns with its current priorities. For example, Serbia is attractive both for the US and the EU when it comes to critical raw materials, such as lithium, which is of great strategic importance for them, but highly contested topic in Serbia, as citizens have been protesting against mining for years, further complicating the

government's leverage and fine balancing in international arena. A more detailed description of both the EU-Serbia and the US-Serbia relations is provided later in the paper.⁴

THE NEW GLOBAL CONTEXT – US AND EU STRATEGIC REPOSITIONING

Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections in 2024 promised a new shift in American foreign policy after January 20, 2025 that was supposed to represent a response to fundamental global changes. At the moment this article is being written, more than six months into his second term, and a number of these expectations are fulfilled. Still, as Nedeljković and Živojinović (2025, pp. 24-25) stress, these specifics are mainly related to methods of foreign policy, while the overarching goals, especially long-term ones, remain broadly aligned with those pursued by previous administrations, as was the case during his first presidency. However, Trump's approach is more forceful, shaped by his firm grip on the Republican Party, the drive to secure his legacy, and greater political experience.

The international context he faces is also more volatile. US–China competition has intensified, the Russia–Ukraine war escalated, and the Middle East grew more unstable with Israel's offensive in Gaza. Trump quickly appointed envoys for Ukraine and the Middle East, pressed Kyiv while criticising European allies, and openly signalled sympathy for some of Putin's views – seeking to end the war and shift US focus toward China.⁵ In the Middle East, Trump's decision to directly bomb Iran's nuclear facilities opens a new Pandora's box for the region's future, one that could have decisively global implications. His economic policy relies on tariffs as a main tool to coerce allies and rivals alike in order to gain leverage.

Trump's preference for economic nationalism and protectionist economic policies, transactional bilateral deals in diplomacy, disdain for multilateral formats and institutions, demonstrated in (second) withdrawal

⁴ For detailed analysis of Serbian relations with Russia, China, Turkey and the UAE, see: Marciacq, 2019.

⁵ Potentially, this approach has roots in the long-term aspirations to create a dividing line in the Beijing–Moscow partnership (Crawford, 2021; Nedić and Mandić, 2021).

from Paris climate act and from World Health Organization, and his vision for a more self-reliant and less internationally involved America are all factors other countries must take into account as they navigate their relations with the US. Thus, other countries and the EU have two choices: to rethink the international institutional framework and find alternatives to existing organisations (Woods, 2025) through international cooperation, or try to tie the US closer to these organisations by giving it some concessions. The EU has followed the second approach. Having advanced EU-NATO strategic partnership despite the uncertainty Trump's first term brought for the future of NATO, and with the pressing threat posed by Russia, the EU continued emphasising the cooperation with NATO and the complementarity of its strategic and foreign policy documents and actions to the alliance. At the June 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, all EU members except for Spain agreed to increase their defence expenditure to 5% of GDP by 2035. A month later, the EU and the US finally reached an agreement on 15% tariffs for the majority of EU exports.

In contrast to the US, where Trump's return prompted a decisive U-turn in foreign policy, the EU's main strategic shifts, particularly regarding enlargement policy and the CFSP, have been developing over a longer period. The realignment of US priorities at the international level has therefore mainly underscored the need for faster and more decisive changes in the EU, rather than directly causing them. In general, two shifts in the EU's approach towards the enlargement emerged in the past decade. First, the enlargement made its way back to the priorities list. Looking at the State of the Union speeches, for example, the difference is noticeable. With Ursula von der Leyen's first Commission in 2019, the enlargement became a more prominent issue in the EU. Von der Leyen's 2019 speech announced 'a geopolitical Commission' (EC, 2019) dedicated, among other things, to the enlargement. All of her State of the Union speeches covered the enlargement and the Western Balkans, unlike those of Jean-Claude Juncker and José Manuel Barroso, which dealt with these issues very little or not at all. Second, the EU leaders accepted that 'reform first, enlargement second' is not viable anymore. In 2018, at Sofia EU-Western Balkans summit, the French president Emmanuel Macron pointed out that the Union should not enlarge before performing necessary internal reforms (Gray, 2018). Five years later, at the European Council summit in December 2023, leaders highlighted the necessity for the EU

and candidates to reform themselves in parallel so all are prepared for the enlargement (see: European Council, 2023, section III, point 3).

It is clear by the timeline presented that these two shifts were not caused by Trump's second term. They were caused partially because of the war in Ukraine and also because of other internal and external factors. These factors also influenced the shaping of the EU's foreign policy. Since the war in Ukraine started, both these policy areas became the most important tools for Europe to secure itself. This meant imposing restrictive measures against Russia, rethinking ways for moving away from dependence on Russia's energy resources, fighting misinformation and hybrid threats, securing the Union and its neighbourhood from Russian influence, and of course, strengthening both national and EU-level defence and military capabilities. To achieve this, the EU supports Ukraine, providing EUR 59,6 billion, jointly as the EU and by individual member states, in military support (equipment, soldiers training, defence industry) as of June 2025 (European Council, 2025). Moreover, it actively worked on regulating and further developing its own defence foreseeing some of the largest sums the EU has ever allocated to a single project/initiative: the ReArm Europe Plan/ Readiness 2030 (EC and HR/VP, 2025), a white paper presented in March 2025, and Defence Omnibus Regulation (EC, 2025) proposal which stems from it, envision EUR 800 billion for defence. It is important to note that these funds will be provided through a new loan instrument for joint procurement – Security Action for Europe (SAFE), potential redirection from cohesion funds, European Investment Bank and even private sector support. Perhaps the most interesting provision, which testifies that security (from Russia) is the EU's absolute top priority which puts all other policies and instruments to its purpose, is the one allowing for the activation of national escape clause within the Stability and Growth Pact, i.e. for exceeding the fiscal rules for defence expenditures with a 1.5% of GDP cap until 2029.

SERBIA-EU RELATIONS IN AN EVOLVING ENLARGEMENT POLICY

The relations of Serbia and the EU are highly influenced by their history, geographical proximity and geostrategic interests. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) had signed several agreements with the European Economic Community in the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1990s SFRY dissolved into five countries and experienced economic and political turmoil, wars and NATO bombing. In 2000, its successor, FRY (consisting of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro), had seen a regime change and the first democratic government, led by Zoran Đinđić, in January 2001 – the first government to officially articulate European integration as a national interest. Moreover, Serbia, first as part of FRY, then Serbia and Montenegro, and finally, Republic of Serbia as of 2006 pursued its European integration orientation. At the same time, other ex-Yugoslav countries had also taken this foreign policy approach.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the relations between Serbia and the EU revolved around Serbia's orientating towards the membership in the EU and the EU's aim to stabilise the region – one of the stabilisation instruments was the membership perspective to Serbia and other countries of the so-called Western Balkans announced at the Feira (see: European Council, 2000a, point 67) and Zagreb (see: European Council, 2000b, point 4) summits in 2000 granted at EU-Western Balkans Thessaloniki Summit (see: EC, 2003, point 2) in 2003. In concrete, Serbia and the EU signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2008, followed by Serbia's official application for EU membership the next year. In 2012, Serbia was granted EU membership candidate status. Since then, the EU and entire Europe have faced several major crises, such as the economic crisis, major migration from Asia and Africa, Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and the most recent one, the war in Ukraine. All these crises affected the way the EU approaches (potential) membership candidates and the enlargement policy itself. In addition, as the EU gained experience and learned lessons from all previous enlargement rounds, the enlargement became more structured, strict and detailed in terms of the criteria an aspiring country is obliged to fulfil to become an EU member. Besides that, the mentioned crises, especially the latter one, as well as the issue of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and relations between Belgrade and Pristina, shaped an even more complicated

membership path for Serbia by adding criteria⁶ that put more weight on the high politics dimension of Serbia's EU membership negotiations.

How has the EU enlargement policy developed and changed over time? During the first rounds of enlargement, the negotiations were narrower in scope due to the competencies of the EEC/EU in fewer policy areas compared to today's EU. As the number of the EU's competencies rose and as more countries aspired to become its members, the enlargement policy evolved and became more structured. In 1993 and 1995 respectively, the leaders of the EU members agreed on the Copenhagen and Madrid criteria. In addition, the 1990s were a period when the largest number of countries applied for and negotiated EU membership – the results of these negotiations were the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds in which the EU gained twelve new members. These enlargement rounds were already marked by the *Europe Agreements* and screening process⁷ – the latter was first introduced in 1998. In the case of the Western Balkans, the process was further developed and instead of Europe Agreements, the applicants signed SAAs, which were broader in scope and introduced more political conditionality as opposed to the Europe Agreements that were more focused on economic issues. The rationale behind these differences were the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and transition, therefore SAAs attached more importance to the rule of law, democracy, post-conflict stabilisation, regional cooperation and reconciliation as well as to the cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

⁶ Accession negotiations are organised into thirty-five chapters, further grouped into clusters. Chapters 34 and 35 do not belong to any cluster with the latter being reserved for 'other issues', i.e. those not already covered in the remaining thirty-four. In case of Serbia, this chapter is one of the most complex, as it deals with EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Apart from being highly sensitive topic, this chapter serves as a benchmark for the overall progress of the two sides towards EU membership, but also lacks clear criteria. To bring more clarity and predictability, the 2023 Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relation between Kosovo and Serbia and its Implementation Annex were incorporated in Chapter 35 in 2024.

⁷ Screening is a process conducted by the accession candidate and the European Commission in which the EU *acquis* is presented to the candidate, and candidate's legislation is assessed to plan the reforms and next steps in the alignment with the *acquis*.

The history of the region highly influenced the EU's approach towards the membership negotiations of the Western Balkans, leading to a strong focus on stabilisation rather than democratisation (see: Petrović, 2019, p. 27; Petrović, 2024, p. 83; Felssenkemper and Kmezić, 2019 p. 26; Kovačević, 2019). Calling Serbia's path to the EU membership a 'vicious circle of high politics', Miloš Petrović (Petrović, 2019.) notes that stability imperative in the region leads to unresolvedness of sensitive high political issues by leaving them unresolved to avoid further instability, while at the same time, the membership aspirants' invested efforts are not evaluated proportionally to the costs and risks they bare. In addition, Richter and Wunsch (2019, p. 57) argue that the EU's 'conditionality remains insufficient to achieve deep democratisation' in the Western Balkans and needs further efforts from the EU while not relying only on cooperation with the governments but also parliaments and civil society. Fairly, Serbia and other membership aspirants have also contributed to the slow-paced progress. All this, along with the turbulent events in the international and European arena that were constantly rearranging the EU's priorities and shifting its focus away from the enlargement, have led to decades long EU membership negotiations causing the diminishment of the enlargement policy credibility and 'enlargement fatigue' (The Economist, 2006, May 11) or even 'enlargement resistance' (see: Economides, 2020).

In 2018, the European Commission's communiqué, 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans', altered the membership negotiations process in a way that puts the rule of law criteria as the main point of the accession negotiations and a key benchmark against which the EU membership aspirants' progress will be evaluated. It was also the first document to recognise the prospect of EU membership as a 'geostrategic investment in stable, strong and united Europe' and its security and economic growth (EC, 2018, p. 1), which will gain its full meaning with the start of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the text of the document starts by recalling the words of the President of the EC at the time, Jean-Claude Juncker, that it was 'clear that there will be no further enlargement during the mandate of' his Commission (EC, 2018, p. 1). The document recognised the previously mentioned challenges and flaws of the enlargement policy, called for the regularisation of EU-Western Balkans summits, and reiterated the EU's commitment to the enlargement as well as how it should prepare itself for

more members. However, the starting point which indicates that the enlargement negotiations are to last for years to come, as well as the enhanced focus on the membership criteria, sent a rather discouraging message to the membership candidates, despite setting 2025 as a date for potential enlargement to the frontrunners: Montenegro and Serbia, and creating an ambitious roadmap for the two countries to meet this goal. Nevertheless, 2025 did not see any enlargement so far, although Montenegro currently works on fulfilling the closing benchmarks and becoming a member state in 2027/28. Serbia on the other hand, has opened 22 out of 35 chapters and provisionally closed two.

To overcome the aforementioned challenges, the EU came up with a revised membership negotiations methodology in February 2020. The principles of the revised methodology were: more credibility, a stronger political steer, a more dynamic process, and predictability, positive and negative conditionality, offering a new impetus for the candidates to enhance their efforts towards meeting membership criteria. However, neither did Serbia step up its reforms, nor did the EU act according to the plan set out in the revised methodology. The Covid-19 pandemic once again pushed the enlargement further back on the list of the EU's priorities. Another crisis – the war in Ukraine which started in February 2022 – created another strong momentum for the enlargement to help the European Union consolidate its security by speeding up the accession process as a geostrategic move (See: Milutinović and Popova, 2024, p. 249). Both the EU and Serbia did not make the most out of this momentum; Serbia, in fact, started drifting away from the ever-changing accession criteria as it did not join the majority of the restrictive measures against Russia, which indirectly confirmed the incompatibility of its national interests: to become the member of the EU and to preserve its sovereignty and territorial integrity. On the other hand, it was only in November 2023 that the European Commission adopted the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, a plan that would finally result in concrete actions for the benefit of the candidates, as envisioned by the revised methodology; this would embody the gradual integration of membership candidates and allow them to use certain resources that were previously used only by the member states, as well as to take part into the work of some EU institutions (as observers). Based on the Growth Plan, Serbia adopted its Reform Agenda, and the European Commission adopted it in

October 2024. As a result, Serbia joined the EU's Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) payment schemes in May 2025.

Although some progress has been achieved, it is important to note that Serbia has not opened any negotiating cluster since December 2021, although the European Commission has called for an opening of Cluster 3 for several years in a row. There could be several reasons for this. One of them is the inadequate pace of reforms in the rule of law and democracy areas in Serbia, but the state of play has remained similar to the one when the last cluster was opened in December 2021. Another reason could be the (lack of) progress in Chapter 35 dealing with the normalisation of Belgrade-Pristina relations, however, the situation in this regard also remains unchanged. The third set of criteria that gained crucial importance since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine is alignment with the CFSP. In, for the EU most important area at the moment, that is the declarations and measures against Russia, Serbia backslides: Serbia's alignment with CFSP declarations and restrictive measures fluctuated from 45% to 64% 2019-2024, and was 51% in 2024 (EC, 2020; 2021; 2022; 2024f).⁸ Having this in mind, it can be concluded that the third set of criteria is the main reason Serbia did not advance in negotiations by opening a new cluster. Precisely, it joined SEPA, as mentioned, and received the first financing under Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2025), which is preconditioned by the reforms in the rule of law area and, in case of Serbia, with the progress in Belgrade-Pristina dialogue as confirmed in EU Regulation 2024/1449, article. 5 (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024), yet the member states' green light to open a new cluster has not been given.

It could be concluded that the high politics and 'a stronger political steer' as envisioned by the revised methodology, proved that the enlargement process is highly political with 27 veto players and that Serbia's foreign policy orientation and national interests to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity and preserve Kosovo and Metohija on

⁸ The most notable drop in alignment was marked in 2022 when it decreased from 64% in 2021 to 45%. On the other hand, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia are fully aligned with the CFSP (see: EC, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d).

one hand, and to become a member of the EU, on the other, are in the times of a great political and security crisis in Europe, highly incompatible. What could have been the major incentive for both Serbia and the EU for the former to join the latter had become the biggest obstacle to Serbia's accession progress. To this day, the unsatisfactory progress of Serbia in the areas of the greatest importance in the negotiations has not resulted in a reversal of the process, however, for years, it has remained stagnant.

US–SERBIA RELATIONS: RECURRING ISSUES AND SELECTIVE COOPERATION

The evolution of US foreign policy at the global level was followed by changes at the regional level. This includes Western Balkans and Serbia. Still, as the region's importance was diminishing exponentially throughout the 21st century, the main coordinates, priorities and established patterns were not drastically recalibrated as the interest of American foreign policy decision makers was waning.⁹ As a result, the overall course of action remained largely set, limiting the scope for significant change. Consequently, several major issues and topics have remained central to US-Serbia relations throughout the past decade and a half, despite changes in presidential administrations.

Foremost among these issues is the question of Kosovo and Metohija. Here, the positions of Belgrade and Washington remain diametrically opposed: Serbia does not recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, while the US was both the primary architect and strongest supporter of that declaration. The American role in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, conducted primarily under EU facilitation, has been that of an interested party and an active stakeholder. Although the dialogue has been marked by major setbacks and extended periods without meaningful progress, it has produced three key documents so far.

The first is 'The First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations', informally known as the Brussels Agreement, signed in April 2013. Its implementation remains limited, with the central

⁹ For the clear and precise overview of the US-Serbia relations in the first two decades of the 21st century see: Vujačić, 2021.

point of contention being the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. The second is the so-called Washington agreement, consisting of two separate bilateral declarations signed in September 2020 between Washington and, respectively, Belgrade and Pristina. This White House initiative sidelined the EU and tackled other important elements for Trump's administration at the time, such as those relating to recognition of Israel and its capital (Lišanin, 2021, pp. 177-178). It came after the initial Washington's renewed interest for the region that was expressed in the plan for territorial swap between Serbia and Kosovo. The negotiations, based on the idea of National Security Advisor at the time, John Bolton, didn't amount to anything, mainly due to the strong opposition from European countries led by Germany (Krstić, 2021, pp. 219-220). The third document is the 'Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia Euro-Atlantic integration' agreed by both sides throughout a series of meetings and summits in late 2022-early 2023. Although its implementation also remained poor, a notable feature of this agreement is its integration into Serbia's EU accession process.

Another major issue concerns the status of Republika Srpska within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. From the perspective of Banja Luka and Belgrade, continued efforts to transfer authority to Sarajevo and centralise governance directly contradict Serbian national interests, a view not shared by Washington. The American perspective deems Milorad Dodik's rhetoric and actions as secessionist and threatening to regional security. In response, the US has imposed several rounds of sanctions on Dodik and his allies. While this approach has prompted caution in Belgrade, it has not led to any significant change in Serbia's stance.

Euro-Atlantic integration presents another important element of the US-Serbia relationship. As Serbia declares EU membership as one of its national interests and foreign policy priorities the US supports the European integration of Serbia. While key outcomes and developments of this process are addressed elsewhere in the article, this section focuses on Serbia's cooperation with NATO. Since declaring military neutrality in 2007, Serbia has maintained a position that rules out joining any military alliance, which in practice means particularly NATO. While the alliance and the US as its principal military power respect this stance, the two sides

have developed comprehensive modalities of cooperation. Serbia is a member of the Partnership for Peace program and has concluded numerous agreements with NATO. In 2015, Serbia and NATO upgraded their relations to the level of Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), the highest mechanism for NATO's cooperation with partner countries that have no aspirations for NATO membership. Furthermore, the Serbian army is regularly organising military exercise 'Platinum Wolf' with the US European Command (Mitrović and Mihajlović Denić, 2025, p. 181). Tying cooperation with NATO to the previous topic, the continued presence of KFOR on Kosovo and Metohija presents an important factor of stability and security guarantees for the Serbian population living there.

Finally, as a consequence of the described multipolarisation process, the previous two administrations have mainly reoriented their lens for assessing relations with Serbia to one of regional great power competition. The continued influence of Russia and rising presence of China have prompted the US to adopt a more active stance. As the influence of both of these powers, particularly Russia, is connected to their stance on the Kosovo and Metohija issue, all of these elements are interlinked. Thus, economic development and regional cooperation initiatives, promoted during the Trump administration by special envoy Richard Grenell, had the additional goal to limit the influence of rival powers (Dašić, 2021, pp. 205-209). For the Biden administration, Russia's invasion of Ukraine added a new layer of complexity. While Washington urged Serbia to join international sanctions against Russia, criticism subsided as Serbia emerged as a quiet yet reliable supplier of arms and equipment to Ukraine, the fact purposely lacking widespread public acknowledgment (Russel and Dunai, 2024).

The second front of geopolitical competition has been energy diversification. Reducing Serbia's dependence on Russian gas and oil is seen as a means of weakening Moscow's political leverage. The planned energy partnership between Serbia and the US is supposed to contribute to this goal. The two sides signed an Agreement on Strategic Cooperation in Energy with the US in September 2024, and US company Bechtel expressed interest in constructing the Đerdap 3 hydropower plant (Spasić, 2024). On the other side of this coin, the carrots are replaced by sticks in the form of potential sanctions imposed on Serbian NIS, due to majority-ownership by Gazprom Neft and Gazprom. Thus far, Serbia has secured

several waivers, but the long-term solution remains elusive. Regarding China, the US priority lies in the prevention of partnership with Chinese companies for extraction of critical raw materials, especially lithium from Western Serbia, and behind the scenes support for projects in this domain with Western-based corporations.

All three topics should be understood from the perspective of regional stability, for which Serbia's role is critical. As the largest country in the Western Balkans, with complex relations, connections or bilateral issues with its neighbours, Serbia is rightly seen as a key factor for (de)stabilisation of the region. In this light, Serbia's meandering process of European integration, its strong ties with Moscow, growing partnership with Beijing, and divergent positions on regional issues compared with American ones, along with ongoing concerns about democracy and the rule of law, are largely tolerated by Washington, all in order to steer the overall state of the Western Balkans in the desired direction, the one that has not dramatically shifted between Democratic and Republican administrations.

As the current administration strategy develops, the trade relations are bearing a significant impact due to Trump's protectionist policies. The introduction of trade tariffs reflecting the US' trade deficit regarding countries where it exists, meant that Serbia was threatened with high tariffs of 37%, which were later reduced to 35% with the implementation starting from August 1, 2025 (N1, 2025). Of course, Trump's inconsistencies and changing approach on this matter leaves the space for future modifications. However, over the longer term, the potentially most challenging issue that could impact the relationship is Serbia's highly developed cooperation with China. The large infrastructural projects built by Chinese companies, Serbia-China free trade agreement, visible displays of close ties including visit of Xi Jinping in early May of 2024, as well as collaboration with China in matters of security and policing could potentially turn on alarms in Washington and incite pressures on Belgrade.

SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY DIRECTION AT THE CROSSROADS: THREE SCENARIOS

Considering the evolving trajectories of both American and European foreign policy amid changes in the international context, and their

implications for US-Serbia and EU-Serbia relations, Belgrade's strategic alignment may come under pressure to be reconsidered in response to the new circumstances. Serbia's foreign policy decision makers are already compelled to reassess the results achieved thus far and to formulate a diverse and adaptable strategy for the future. Serbia's so-called multi-vector or four-pillar foreign policy, while delivering notable benefits, has also resulted in missed opportunities, particularly when decisions were shaped by considerations of consequences for the governing parties in the domestic political arena. Now, it can potentially find itself at the crossroads. However, the highly unpredictable nature of the newly rising context can lead to formation of two contrasting types of strategic environments. As defined by Ripsman, Lobell and Tagliaferro (2016, p. 52), the country's strategic environment can be permissive or restrictive. This distinction depends on the imminence and magnitude of threats and opportunities: 'the more imminent the threat or opportunity and the more dangerous the threat (or the more enticing the opportunity) the more restrictive the state's strategic environment is. Conversely, the more remote the threat or opportunity and the less intense the threat or opportunity, the more permissive the strategic environment is' (Ripsman, Lobell and Tagliaferro, 2016, p. 52). Accordingly, the permissive strategic environment promotes a widening manoeuvring space for Serbia, while the restrictive one constrains it to only one possible direction. Having this in mind, three specific ideal-type scenarios crystallise as possible alternatives.

The first one is 'the status quo' scenario, which relies on continuing the current trajectory of maintaining cordial relations with all major actors and navigating between their interests to preserve a favourable position for Serbia. In many aspects this strategy coincides with the increasingly relevant concept of hedging that is employed to explain strategies of countries that do not conform to the classic balancing-bandwagoning alignment dichotomy (Walt, 1985). Instead, such actors seek to hedge their bets by cultivating ties with opposing sides in pursuit of risk management for their own position.¹⁰ Serbia's efforts can in many ways be seen as

¹⁰ The concept has primarily been applied to explain the strategic alignment choices of Southeast Asian countries, but it has increasingly been used to analyse other regions as well. For analyses of hedging in Southeast Asia, see: Kuik, 2016; Nedić, 2022.

examples of this approach (Mitić, 2024, pp. 246-256). This scenario envisions continued efforts to maintain that hedging course. It entails sustained strategic balancing between the Western pillars (EU and US) and the Eastern ones (Russia and China). Furthermore, Serbia would maintain military neutrality, and, as the tensions rise, stress this aspect even further, opting to lower visible aspects of cooperation with major alliances, such as joint military exercise with NATO. As at present, Serbia would continue to keep a low profile on key and highly contentious international issues that do not concern it directly. Its diplomatic ambiguity on war in Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East, tensions in the Indo-Pacific would remain an important feature, as any clear stance could trigger repercussions in relations with major actors.

The scenario keeps a continued aspiration for EU membership, albeit one where other priorities and considerations take precedence over the reforms and steps necessary for meaningful and accelerated progress on the European path. In relation to the US, there is continued selective cooperation in areas of mutual interest, such as energy, in exchange for lack of prioritisation and muted criticism from Washington on issues where positions diverge. Regional stability would remain fragile, depending on the continued success of Belgrade's balancing act. The position on Kosovo and Metohija would remain unchanged, with a strategy of prolonging negotiations without tangible outcomes, effectively resulting in the gradual deterioration of the situation for the Serbian population in the province. In the economic domain, the scenario includes the further efforts to attract investments from a variety of sources, including the EU, China, mainly via the Belt and Road Initiative, UAE, while avoiding full dependence on any single partner. The primary drivers of this scenario stem from its familiarity and prior success, the need to navigate domestic political divisions and pro-Russian public sentiment, as well as elite interest in sustaining multiple partnerships for external support and political-economic leverage. However, this potential limbo of ambiguity keeps Serbia in the precarious position of constant uncertainty and without reliable and steadfast allies. While not inherently negative, implementation of this scenario increases the potential to miss windows of opportunity regarding progress in EU accession and potential long-term setbacks on key national interests should the regional, European, or global context shift rapidly.

The second scenario envisions complete alignment with the West. It is grounded in the logic of clear alignment based on geographical location, economic ties, and value-based reasoning. The volume of trade with the EU, Serbia's cultural and historical elements that bind it to Europe, the security implications of being surrounded by NATO members, and the anticipated effects of EU membership all serve as motivations for this possible strategic shift. The core premise is a clear commitment to EU accession, including comprehensive institutional reforms in line with EU standards on the rule of law, media freedom, and democracy, as well as alignment with EU foreign and security policy, especially through the introduction of sanctions on Russia. This kind of alignment would also necessitate a reduction in strategic cooperation with China, particularly in the area of large-scale joint critical infrastructure projects, energy and technology. This is an element that would probably be emphasised by both the current and future US presidential administrations. The partnership with the US would largely resemble that outlined in Scenario 1, as American focus, goals, and aspirations for engagement in the region remain limited. One critical area in which this relationship would be essential is securing alternative energy sources, as sanctions and distancing from Moscow would inevitably result in severe consequences for the availability and pricing of oil and gas imports from Russia. It would also lead to the loss of major support in the international diplomatic fora, both from Moscow and likely Beijing. Thus, the breakthrough in EU-facilitated negotiations with Pristina would represent a major and necessary step. The overall regional stability would improve as tensions with neighbours subside.

The security partnership with NATO would become more pronounced, featuring increased procurement of weapons and equipment from NATO countries, expanded joint military exercises, and a full transition to the new official cooperation framework: the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (Popović, 2024). However, the idea of NATO membership would remain unlikely due to overwhelmingly negative public opinion. The driving forces behind this scenario include a combination of carrots and sticks, ranging from the economic incentives from the EU and a potential acceleration of the accession path on one side, to Western pressure and conditionality tied to financial aid and foreign investment on the other. Beyond the significant impact of distancing from China and Russia, this

scenario would also provoke explicit domestic polarisation, as pro-Russian actors and Eurosceptic segments of the population would respond negatively. Overall, Scenario 2 promises long-term benefits from clear alignment, bringing economic and security gains, but these are offset by significant short-term drawbacks such as public dissatisfaction, major economic blows, energy insecurity, and the need to significantly adjust positions on critical regional and national interests. Furthermore, with the fact that EU accession, as the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, also depends on the Union's willingness to expand, Serbia could end up making major concessions without any guaranteed reward.

The third scenario is nearly a mirror image of the second. It envisions a Eurasian turn marked by clearer strategic alignment with Russia and China. The logic that drives this scenario stems from the same basis as the one of Scenario 2, namely the need to make a clear commitment to specific partners to advance national interests, while accepting the resulting deterioration in relations with opposing actors. However, in this scenario, strategic calculation points towards alignment with Moscow and Beijing as the more advantageous path. Chinese investments, expanding trade, and political and diplomatic backing give strength to the argument that China represents a reliable partner with significantly fewer conditions and requirements than Western countries. As for Russia, traditional ties, widespread domestic support, energy dependence, and backing of Serbian interests in international organisations candidate it as a key strategic ally. This scenario would entail stronger support from Belgrade for the multi-polarity narrative, increased vocal opposition to Western dominance, and a media and institutional shift toward Eurasian narratives and cooperation frameworks such as BRICS.

Relations with the EU would deteriorate and access to European funds and investments would become restricted, as the importance of European integration takes a major downturn. Although a formal break with the EU or an official abandonment of Serbia's EU path seems unlikely, a practical hold on any advancement in the accession process would become evident. Economic setbacks would also be apparent, as ties with Russia and China cannot meaningfully compensate for the loss of trade with the EU market. Relations with Washington would also decline, with the US likely to reemphasise unresolved issues such as the Bitići case or the Banjska

incident, increase support for Pristina, and, most critically, reactivate measures to curb Serbia's energy cooperation with Russia. Regional relations would also suffer greatly, and most regional initiatives, such as Open Balkans and the already stagnating Berlin Process, would likely collapse entirely. As the country finds itself in an increasingly hostile environment, the security concerns would need to come to the forefront. The driving force for this scenario would come from external events such as the withdrawal of Western support for the current Serbian regime or increased pressure concerning the Kosovo and Metohija issue. However, geographic distance and logistical realities significantly limit the potential benefits of a Moscow and Beijing oriented foreign policy. Its unreliability is reinforced by the inability or reluctance of China and Russia to provide meaningful support to their key partners, a fact demonstrated by their recent lack of decisive action in response to US bombing attacks on Iran (Roll, 2025). The resulting practical isolation from Euro-Atlantic partners, heightened risks of regional instability, notably concerning Kosovo and Metohija, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, as well as long-term dependence on China and Russia that could undermine Serbia's strategic autonomy make this scenario viable only under specific circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Amid the strategic shift introduced in the US foreign policy by Donald Trump and the EU newly refocused on security issues, the possibility for any of the three scenarios to actualise are different and dependent on numerous factors and lead to several conclusions.

First, it must be noted that, as is common with this type of conceptual exercise, all three scenarios represent ideal types, constructed through a high degree of abstraction and simplification. This implies that, in practice, full alignment of Serbia's future foreign policy with any single scenario is unlikely. Instead, tendencies toward one of the three scenarios, showing varying degrees of correspondence with their specific elements, can serve as indicators of trends and long-term strategic direction. Second, with this in mind, the EU and US on one side, and Russia and China on the other, are grouped together in the scenarios. Although each of these actors has its own approach, positions, interests and goals, for the model developed

here, they can be grouped in this way as the main reasons for and consequences of alignment with one of the partnered actors typically apply to the other as well, respectively. Third, not all scenarios demand the same degree of foreign policy adjustment for their elements to manifest in practice. The first scenario, as a continuation and further evolution of Serbia's current foreign policy model, requires the fewest changes in direction. By contrast, the second and third scenarios represent decisive turns toward opposing blocs and would require a far more comprehensive set of changes.

Finally, going back to the concepts of permissive and restrictive strategic environments, it becomes clear that these conditions create fundamentally different contexts for the viability of each scenario. The permissive environment opens the space up for consideration of the full spectrum of available options. With greater room for manoeuvre, the appeal and feasibility of hedging and cooperation with multiple partners increase. Although the other scenarios remain theoretically possible, the absence of strong external pressure means that a definitive alignment choice is not necessary. Therefore, the first scenario remains the most realistic, as its drawbacks are more likely to be mitigated successfully. Conversely, a restrictive strategic environment fosters a different mode of thinking. As the imminence and magnitude of threats grow, pressure to opt for one of the sides intensifies. In this situation, the probability for the first scenario to work diminishes, while the necessity of choosing between the second and third scenarios increases.

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