



Military Exercises in the Post-Yugoslav States: Between Balancing and Bandwagoning

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Abstract: Military exercises are a tool for demonstrating and evaluating force readiness to operate in both war and peacetime, as well as a driver of a specific form of international military cooperation. Participation in international military exercises can serve as an indicator of states' behavior in international relations, whether in bilateral or multilateral cooperation. In international relations theory, the behavior of states toward alliances and other international actors, especially those perceived as superior in power, is often defined through two extreme forms: balancing and bandwagoning. The form of behavior that a state decides to adopt depends on several factors, such as its power relative to other significant actors, the degree of perceived threat posed by those actors, the state's position and role in the international system, and the structure of that system. This article examines the positioning of the post-Yugoslav states in international relations, using military exercises as an indicator of that positioning. Military exercises can reflect both balancing and bandwagoning strategies, and this article explores when post-Yugoslav states have adopted one or the other. As an indicator of a country's foreign policy positioning, military exercises show that the countries in this region continue to employ different strategies rather than a uniform approach. Instead of all pursuing a strategy of bandwagoning with respect to one power, some opt for balancing, striving for equal cooperation with all key actors.

Keywords: military cooperation, military exercises, NATO, Serbia, Western Balkans, Partnership for Peace, PfP.

Introduction

Military exercises are an important part of regular military activities. Throughout history, they have been a fundamental part of preparing a country's forces for engagement during wartime and peacetime. With advancements in technology and the general modernization of military capacities, doctrines, strategies, and tactics, military exercises have remained crucial for enhancing capabilities while also acquiring new roles within the frameworks of national security, international cooperation, and even rivalry. This has intensified the foreign policy importance of armed forces and expanded their role beyond merely projecting power and defending against external threats – that is, beyond just deterrence and defense. Modern military exercises simulate war conditions, engagement in hostile terrain, and the synchronized use of human and technological assets, with the primary objective of assessing and enhancing the operational capabilities of the armed forces. However, during the 20th century—and especially in the early decades of the 21st century—the role of these exercises in demonstrating military capabilities has become increasingly prominent as a means of deterring potential adversaries from engaging in hostile actions.

The Cold War was the most prominent period during which military capacities were employed in various types of exercises to convey messages to the opposing side about defensive and offensive potentials, as well as to the domestic public regarding the capability for protection and response in the event of a sudden attack. The multifunctionality of military exercises in this sense was most extensively utilized by the two blocs centered around the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, with nuclear testing being the most significant sign of their rivalry. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR bloc, territories and spheres of influence previously under its control opened up space for the development of distinct regional security dynamics, which had previously been impossible due to the dominance of the superpowers. This shift in the international system created a power vacuum in political, ideological, and military terms. It had a profound impact on Yugoslavia, which had not been under the direct control or influence of either bloc. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) found itself in an international system where the power vacuum became so pronounced that it disrupted the state's internal stability, ultimately leading to internal conflicts and the emergence of six new independent republics in the 1990s.

During this period, international engagement in this part of the Balkan Peninsula played a significant role in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and the formation of the newly established states. The pivotal moment in international military engagement in the Balkan region occurred during the Yugoslav wars from 1991 to 1995 and in 1999 during the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, after which important political and social processes unfolded, eventually leading to the separation of its constituent parts into independent republics:

namely Serbia, Montenegro (2006), and the disputed territory of Kosovo and Metohija (with Kosovo declaring independence in 2008).

The central themes of the article revolve around analyzing the participation of post-Yugoslav states in military exercises in the 21st century as indicators of their behavior in international relations and their positioning in accordance with the perception of the broader international environment. The article examines whether this behavior and positioning represent a form of balancing or bandwagoning strategy and what implications these choices have for the stability of the entire region. The authors conclude that military exercises have found a distinct place in the post-conflict security dynamics of the post-Yugoslav states, with some following bandwagoning and others adopting balancing strategies. This implies that these countries are still pursuing different paths to achieve security and that the region remains susceptible to uncertainties and potential destabilization.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of international relations and security provides an explanation for the behavior of states in the international system, which also includes their military cooperation. Morgenthau established the foundations for explaining the behavior in international relations, linking it to power, status, and the role of states in the international system. According to Morgenthau, great powers strive to prevent the hegemony of one of them in an anarchic international system, which they achieve through balancing – by creating alliances and forms of cooperation with other states that equalize or overcome rival power(s).¹

Morgenthau focused not only on the general setup of the Cold War bipolar international system but also included in his analysis the regions and the behavior of states throughout history. This led him to conclude that small states also carry out balancing, which was later explained by expanding security studies. This expansion specifically occurred at the regional level of analysis, highlighting distinctive dynamics within regional security.² Walt was the first to make a clear distinction between balancing and bandwagoning in his work. According to Walt, “Balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat; bandwagoning refers to alignment with the source of danger.”³ States align with stronger actors to gain the benefits of an alliance with the dominant power. These benefits are achieved through association, but the party that carries out bandwagoning usually has no significant influence, nor does it significantly affect the status or strength of the alliance it joins.⁴

¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 142-143.

² Filip Ejduš, *International Security: Theories, Sectors and Levels* (Belgrade, Serbia: Chigoja Press and Faculty of Political Sciences, 2017), 26-28. – in Serbian

³ Stephen M. Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁴ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 17.

States enter into alliances to protect themselves from other, more powerful states that they perceive as a threat, a strategy that, on a systemic scale, is defined as balancing. Walt points out that “Balancing is alignment with the weaker side, bandwagoning with the stronger.”⁵ According to Morgenthau, small states often do not have enough power to balance in the true sense and must find another tactic, which Kenneth Waltz describes as bandwagoning – joining the side perceived as stronger and offering some greater benefits.⁶ Bandwagoning might be used as a strategy of pacification or division of the spoils. By joining an existing alliance with a state or group perceived as threatening, the actor who bandwagons strives to evade an assault on itself by redirecting it to another target. Additionally, a state might choose to side with the prevailing party in a conflict to partake in the benefits of triumph.⁷

In terms of state cooperation, this implies that the state joins the alliance by “jumping on the wagon,” perceiving that the alliance is successful and that it can benefit from cooperation – whether in terms of gaining greater security or achieving material and political gains. This benefit primarily concerns the use of the alliance’s already achieved results, whereas, in the case of balancing, alliance members tend to achieve results together. The concepts of balancing and bandwagoning are difficult to test, as they represent two extremes in state behavior, and the criteria for defining when one form of that behavior is observed in practice are not clear-cut. The difficulty lies in the fact that one state can exhibit balancing in one area of cooperation and bandwagoning in another.⁸

Military Cooperation in the Post-Yugoslav States during the 21st Century

The development of international military cooperation in the Balkans after the 1990s has been facilitated by NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. The PfP program aims to enhance bilateral cooperation between NATO and partner countries and establish peace and stability in the alliance’s neighborhood through various collaborative efforts. Activities within the PfP program encompass nearly all aspects of NATO operations, including defense-related tasks, reform processes, defense policy development, education and training, military cooperation, joint exercises, and response to civil emergencies.

Some post-Yugoslav countries were involved in the program from the very beginning, such as Slovenia (1994) and North Macedonia (1995), while others

⁵ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 21

⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1979), 125-126

⁷ Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 72-107, 81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539149>.

⁸ David C. Kang, “Between Balancing and Bandwagoning: South Korea’s Response to China,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 1-28, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1598240800002794>.

joined later (Croatia – 2000; Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – 2006). Some post-Yugoslav countries, through progress in the Euro-Atlantic integration process, have become full-fledged NATO members (Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro), while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have continued close cooperation with the alliance through the PfP.⁹

In line with the focus of this work, military exercises are the primary area of interest through which this aspect of partnership and the development of mutual relations in the region will be observed. Slovenia was the first country to directly participate in the PfP with its involvement in the NATO 1998 *Cooperative Adventure Exchange* military exercise. Slovenia's participation demonstrated that Balkan countries are capable and willing to implement NATO standards and enhance their capacities.¹⁰ Therefore, it became one of the first newly established republics to join the alliance in 2004, leading to the integration of its armed forces in numerous training engagements with units of other NATO countries.

Croatia's international military cooperation has primarily focused on the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the PfP since its inception. The country's direct readiness to collaborate with NATO was particularly evident during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, when Croatia opened its airspace for NATO members' aircraft. In 2000, with the signing of the PfP Framework Document, cooperation and participation in NATO programs were formalized.

Croatia quickly became involved in various international military activities under NATO's auspices, particularly in capacity-building, training, and enhancing command and communication capabilities.¹¹ Some of the earliest examples of the participation of members of the Croatian Armed Forces in NATO exercises include *Combined Endeavor 2000*, an annual exercise focused on information and communication systems, interoperability testing, and documentation; *Taming the Dragon-Dalmatia 2002*, a civil-military exercise for crisis response;¹² and *Cooperative Engagement 2003*, an exercise aimed at achieving interoperability and compatibility among NATO aspirant countries and participants from the PfP program.¹³

⁹ "The Partnership for Peace Programme," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.sto.nato.int/Pages/partnership-for-peace.aspx>.

¹⁰ "Address," Speeches & Transcripts, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last updated November 5, 2008, accessed November 10, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_26011.htm.

¹¹ "Milestones in Croatian Accession to NATO," Permanent Representation of Croatia to NATO, December, 10, 2010, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://mvpep.gov.hr/news-and-announcements/158940>.

¹² "Taming the Dragon – Dalmatia 2002," NATO Slovenia, January 14, 2003, accessed November 10, 2023, <http://nato.gov.si/slo/nato/tretja-dimenzija/civilno-krizno/sode-lovanje-vaje/krotitev-zmaja/>. – in Slovenian

¹³ "Cooperative Engagement 2003," VOA, September, 13, 2003, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://ba.voanews.com/a/a-37-a-2003-09-13-4-1-85874672/1153557.html>.

In 2003, Croatia planned nine bilateral military exercises with the United States,¹⁴ one of the most prominent being *Adriatic Phiblex 03*, a two-month military exercise focused on training ground engineering forces.¹⁵ Croatia's collaboration with specific countries and within the PfP program significantly intensified in the following years. This was particularly evident through increased engagement in joint, bilateral, and multilateral military exercises such as *Adriatic Phiblex 042 ENGINEEREX* (2004), *Adrion 2006*, *ARIEX06 – Adriatic Regional Integrated Exercise* (2006), *LOGEX* (a logistics exercise), *Adriatic Eagle*, and *Noble Midas* (2007),¹⁶ which Croatian officials regarded as an important test for NATO membership.¹⁷ Other notable exercises included *Adriatic Shield 08* (2008)¹⁸ and *Adriatic Aurora 2008*.¹⁹ In 2009, Croatia became a full member of NATO, after which its international military cooperation further increased and became more formalized.

Montenegro, as another post-Yugoslav state, began independent cooperation with NATO shortly after gaining independence in 2006 by joining the PfP program. Already in 2007, warships from Spain and the United States visited Montenegrin ports.²⁰ The Montenegrin forces first participated in the international exercises *Combined Endeavor 2008* and *2009* with eight soldiers.²¹ Activi-

¹⁴ "Decision on holding bilateral military exercises of members of the armed forces of the Republic of Croatia and the United States of America during 2003 on the territory of the Republic of Croatia," *Narodne Novine* (Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia), May 16, 2003, accessed November 12, 2023, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2003_05_80_970.html. – in Croatian

¹⁵ Petra Kostanjšak, "Military Time Machine," *Hrvatski Vojnik* (Croatian Soldier), no. 505 (July 29, 2016): 49, https://hrvatski-vojn timer.hr/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/hv_505.pdf. – in Croatian

¹⁶ Leida Parlov and Domagoj Vlahović, "A Look Back at the Development of the Victorious Croatian Armed Forces," *Hrvatski Vojnik* (Croatian Soldier), no. 500 (2016): 10-19, 17-18, <https://hrvatski-vojn timer.hr/pogled-unatrag-na-razvoj-pobjednickih-oruzanih-snaga-rh/>, https://www.morh.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/HV_500_10_19.pdf. – in Croatian

¹⁷ "Military Exercise 'Noble Midas 07,'" Republic of Croatia Ministry of the Interior, October 5, 2007, accessed November 12, 2023, <https://mup.gov.hr/vijesti-8/vojna-vjezba-noble-midas-07/5683>. – in Croatian

¹⁸ "'Adriatic Shield 08' International Civil-military Exercise," Republic of Croatia Ministry of Finance Customs Administration, May 21, 2008, accessed November 12, 2023, <https://carina.gov.hr/vijesti/adriatic-shield-08-medjunarodna-civilno-vojna-vjezba/325>. – in Croatian

¹⁹ "International Military Exercise 'Adriatic Aurora 2008,'" Republic of Croatia Ministry of Defense, June 25, 2008, accessed November 12, 2023, <https://www.morh.hr/meunarodna-vojna-vjezba-qadriatic-aurora-2008/>. – in Croatian

²⁰ "USS Emory S. Land Visits Montenegro [Image 3 of 3]," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, May, 22, 2007, accessed November 12, 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/47285/uss-emory-s-land-visits-montenegro>.

²¹ "Announcement: Eight members of the Army of Montenegro will participate in the exercise Combined Endeavor 2009 in Banja Luka," Government of Montenegro, September 1, 2009, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/35573--176032>. – in Montenegrin

ties in this regard continued throughout 2010. In these three years, the planning conferences with the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) were held in Montenegro.²²

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, now known as North Macedonia, directly engaged in international military cooperation in 1995 when it joined the PFP program. Its first international military exercise was *Peaceful Eagle 96* (1996) in Albania.²³ The following year, Macedonia hosted its first international military exercise, *Rescuer 97*, followed by *Medical Exercise 97-2*.²⁴ In 1998, international military cooperation intensified, and Macedonia hosted the NATO air exercise *Resolute Falcon*, involving 79 aircraft and members of the special unit "Wolves."²⁵ In the same year, Macedonia again became a host – this time for the *Cooperative Best Effort 98* exercise, aimed at training armed forces personnel for peacekeeping operations and other types of peace engagement.

From 1999 to 2001, due to conflicts in Kosovo and within its own territory, Macedonia suspended its participation in international military exercises. However, in 2002, it became involved in NATO military missions in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. Continuing its collaboration with NATO, Macedonia participated in the 2005 military exercise *NASET 05* as part of training with NATO Headquarters in Skopje, aiming to improve its response to emergency situations.²⁶

Compared to other countries in the Balkans, North Macedonia is significantly ahead in informing the public about its international military activities, which have been closely linked to NATO since gaining independence. Some examples of the participation of the Macedonian Army in international training activities include: *Cooperative Association 05* (2005), with NATO participation under the PFP, where Macedonian forces were assessed for compliance with NATO standards; *NASET 06*; *The Arrival of the Modern Army* (2006), a training exercise with members of the Vermont National Guard; *Balkan Wolf*, a joint exercise with the

²² "Chief of the General Staff of the Army of Montenegro, Vice Admiral Dragan Samardžić, received the leadership of the Army of Montenegro team that will participate in the USEUCOM exercise 'Combined Endeavor 2010'," Government of Montenegro, August 31, 2010, accessed November 12, 2023, <https://www.gov.me/clanak/98907--nacelnik-generalstaba-vojske-crne-gore-viceadmiral-dragan-samardzic-primio-rukovodstvo-tima-vojske-crne-gore-koji-ce-ucestvovati> (archived). – in Montenegrin

²³ "History," Army of the Republic of North Macedonia, last updated 2022, <https://mil.mk/istorija/#1495112299625-2bd66c8c-a0db>. – in Macedonian

²⁴ Mile Donevski, "Perspectives of the Republic of Macedonia for Greater Participation in United Nations-led Peacekeeping Operations," MA Thesis (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2019), 4, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1105030.pdf>.

²⁵ "Army of the Republic of Macedonia – History, Structure and Ranks, Defense Doctrine and Legislative-legal Aspects," *Academik*, August 17, 2014, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://akademik.mk/armija-na-republika-makedonija-istorija-struktura-i-chinoviodbrambena-doktrina-i-zakonodavno-pravni-aspekti/>. – in Macedonian

²⁶ "History 2005," Army of the Republic of North Macedonia, accessed November 13, 2023, <https://mil.mk/history/?lang=en#1495112534014-bea03c3a-0c5b>.

special forces of Bulgaria, a NATO member state; *Seven Stars*, a military exercise within the South-Eastern Europe Brigade;²⁷ *Macedonian Flash 1–14* (2007–2018), a series of exercises held in cooperation with NATO and PfP member states; *Adriatic Eagle 08* (2008); *LOGEX 09* (2009); *Balkan Flash 10* (2010), during which NATO assessment LEVEL 2 – CREVAL (Combat Readiness Evaluation) was conducted²⁸; *Challenge 2011*, 2012, and 2018, joint training exercises with Slovenia aimed at enhancing the skills of air defense personnel; *Cooperative Longbow/Lancer 2012*, an exercise as part of PfP, during which NATO assessment LEVEL 2 – CREVAL was completed;²⁹ *Wise Wolf*, a multinational exercise involving several Balkan countries; *Safe Path – 12*, a bilateral exercise with Norwegian forces³⁰; *Quick Response 19*; *Decisive Strike* (2019), one of the largest NATO military exercises organized in North Macedonia.³¹

Additionally, in 2015, international military cooperation intensified, and Macedonia participated in several exercises: *Joint Reaction-15*, *Trident Juncture-15*, *Saber Junction-15*, and *Immediate Response-15*.³² One of North Macedonia's largest bilateral partners in military cooperation is the United States, and this partnership has been steadily growing. This is evidenced by a series of joint military activities, such as *Dragoon Guardian-17* and *Joint Reaction-17*, in which the Vermont National Guard participated.³³ As demonstrated by the numerous international military exercises in which Macedonia actively participated, the country's cooperation with NATO since gaining independence has been strong and consistent.

The Republic of Serbia, unlike the other post-Yugoslav republics, had a unique history with NATO. The end of the 20th century significantly damaged relations between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and NATO. NATO's activities and engagement during the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo further distanced the FRY. The events that culminated during the 1999 bombing campaign, in which the majority of airstrikes were carried out on present-day Serbian territory, not only jeopardized relations between the FRY and NATO but also created a unique dynamic for Serbia's international military cooperation.

²⁷ Kujtim Hasani, "SEEBRIG: A Military Tool of Partnership," *Stars Informer: South Eastern Europe Brigade Review*, no. 3 (July 2011): 4-5, 5, <https://seebrig.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/issue3-1.pdf>.

²⁸ "Balkan Flash 2010," Army of the Republic of North Macedonia, Exercises, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://mil.mk/exercises/balkan-flash-2010/>.

²⁹ "Cooperative Longbow/Lancer 2012," Army of the Republic of North Macedonia, Exercises, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://mil.mk/exercises/cooperative-longbow-lancer-2012/?lang=en>.

³⁰ "Army of the Republic of Macedonia – History, Structure and Ranks, Defense Doctrine and Legislative-legal Aspects."

³¹ "History 2019," Army of the Republic of North Macedonia, last updated 2022, <https://mil.mk/history/?lang=en#1613381522157-23ed45cf-7da8>.

³² "History 2015," Army of the Republic of North Macedonia, last updated 2022, <https://mil.mk/history/?lang=en#1543838727380-6b88ccd0-92cb>.

³³ Army of the Republic of North Macedonia, "History 2019."

The shift toward normalizing relations with NATO occurred after the overthrow of the authoritarian regime in 2000. In the early 21st century, no government of the Republic of Serbia acknowledged the importance of “jumping onto the bandwagon,” which is evident in the absence of any mention of Serbia’s potential NATO membership in official political agendas and documents, unlike other countries in the region.³⁴ This was further confirmed by the 2007 Resolution of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, which emphasizes the protection of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia, proclaiming its commitment to military neutrality in relation to existing military alliances.³⁵

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a unique example in the Balkans region. Half of the country, consisting of two ethnic groups—Bosniaks and Croats—within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has closely cooperated with NATO since the very beginning of the independent state after the war in 1995. NATO had supported their war efforts on several occasions during the conflict. This, in turn, led to the situation where the Serbian ethnic group, which makes up the other half of the population, refuses closer cooperation with NATO.

It is also important to note that NATO member states are militarily present in Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of peacekeeping missions. Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 2006, and, like the other countries in the Western Balkans, the largest international partner for military exercises is the United States. Due to the active engagement of the U.S. European Command, the exercise *Combined Endeavor 2009* was held in Banja Luka, marking a turning point in relations and cooperation between NATO, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Serbian entity within it.³⁶

This progress paved the way for the intensification of international cooperation, with Bosnia and Herzegovina primarily focusing on cooperation with NATO. This is supported by the fact that, from 2009 to 2022, the armed forces participated in a series of activities with partner countries and NATO members. Some of the most prominent military exercises this country participated in include *Sydstorm*, *Operations Capabilities Concept – Evaluation and Feedback 2014* in Sweden, *REGEX 15, 16*, *Platinum Wolf 16*, *Joint Reaction 17*, and *LEAP 22*.³⁷

³⁴ Zorana Brozović, “Discourse on NATO in Serbian Parliaments (2000–2008),” *International Politics* 61, no. 1139 (2010): 24–34, 28, https://www.diplomacy.bg.ac.rs/pdf/medj_politika/2010/Medjunarodna_politika_br._1139_2010.pdf. – in Serbian

³⁵ “Resolution of the National Assembly on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia,” Government of the Republic of Serbia, last updated 2007, accessed November 15, 2023, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/kosovo-metohija/index.php?id=80729>. – in Serbian

³⁶ Atlantic Initiative, “Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO,” Brochure, February 2010, 10, <https://atlantskainicijativa.org/wp-content/uploads/ai/pdf/brosure/Brosura-1.pdf>. – in Serbian

³⁷ “Exercises in the Country and Abroad,” Ministry of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina, last updated 2023, https://www.mod.gov.ba/OS_BIH/Aktivnosti/Vjezbe_u_zemlji_i_inostranstvu/Archive.aspx?pageIndex=1.

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that the majority of Balkan countries are determined to cooperate with NATO, as most of their activities are connected to this alliance. Military exercises are a highly effective means of demonstrating military capabilities and exerting political influence. As a military alliance, NATO has primarily responded to Russia's initiatives across Europe to reassure member states and assert its deterrence strategy.³⁸

In this context, frequent military exercises with partner states can be used to send a clear message to adversaries regarding a readiness to risk one's own troops in defense of an ally facing military threats. Particularly when allies are distant, military exercises can also demonstrate logistical capabilities for the swift deployment of troops across extensive distances.³⁹ As Heuser and Simpson pointed out, "One crucial political aim of exercises is to reassure allies. Most of the following applies mainly to field training exercises, as they have high visibility."⁴⁰ The increased frequency and geographic scope of these exercises aim to demonstrate NATO's ability to address potential acts of aggression in the region.⁴¹ However, although the entire Balkans has very intensive cooperation with partner countries and NATO members, there are occasional deviations from this pattern. The most obvious example is the Republic of Serbia, which has a complex history with the NATO alliance and the rest of the region.

From our theoretical perspective, post-Yugoslav countries that are now part of NATO decided to follow a bandwagoning strategy after their independence, a strategy common to other Eastern European states that once perceived NATO as a threat and later as a security provider.

The Case of Serbia

Serbia followed the path of cooperation with NATO alongside Montenegro within the former State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. Both countries gained independence only in 2006, after which their approach to cooperation was simplified. In the same year, Serbia signed the Framework Document for Access to the Partnership for Peace (PfP). With this act, Serbia expressed its willingness to develop and improve relations with NATO. However, as can be concluded from

³⁸ Illimar Ploom, Zdzislaw Sliwa, and Viljar Veebel, "The NATO 'Defender 2020' Exercise in the Baltic States: Will Measured Escalation Lead to Credible Deterrence or Provoke an Escalation?" *Comparative Strategy* 39, no. 4 (2020): 368-384, 376, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2020.1772626>.

³⁹ Andris Banka and Margit Bussmann, "Uncomfortable Neighbors: NATO, Russia and the Shifting Logic of Military Exercises in the Baltics," *Defence Studies* 23, no. 1 (2022): 1-24, 7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2022.2089657>.

⁴⁰ Beatrice Heuser and Harold Simpson, "The Missing Political Dimension of Military Exercises," *The RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (2017): 20-28, 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2017.1345118>.

⁴¹ Danylo Kubai, "Military Exercises as a Part of NATO Deterrence Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 41, no. 2 (2022): 155-61, 156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2022.2039009>.

the Resolution of the National Assembly, these relations would remain at the level of partnership. The Republic of Serbia independently prepared a presentation document outlining the political goals of its participation in PfP, the areas of cooperation it is interested in, and the resources and funds it intends to allocate to the program. What differentiates Serbia from other Balkan countries within the PfP is that its presentation document does not mention any aspiration for NATO membership.⁴²

Initially, Serbia was more inclined toward a bandwagoning strategy with NATO. However, after 2007, and given the evident impossibility of securing its national interests through this strategy, Serbia decided to reconsider its position. This shift coincided with the global trend of increasing multipolarity, which encouraged Serbia to frame its military neutrality as *active neutrality*, obliging it to cooperate with all centers of power in the international system. Subsequently, Serbia began balancing the prevailing sources of power in the region. The rise of Serbia's balancing strategy was constrained in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasingly competitive and conflictual relations of the West with Russia and China.

After joining the Partnership for Peace (PfP), the Republic of Serbia became involved in various forms of military-technical cooperation with the alliance. When it comes to military exercises, the majority of information about them—similar to other Western Balkan countries—is obtained from the media or think tanks that focus on military, defense, and security topics. The United States is one of Serbia's most prominent partners in terms of military cooperation. One of the earliest activities involved the Ohio National Guard (ONG), which took place both in Serbia and the United States. In 2007 alone, joint training sessions were conducted more than 20 times across various areas.⁴³ One of the notable activities within this cooperation is the joint training of members of the 63rd Parachute Battalion of the Serbian Army.⁴⁴ Bilateral cooperation with the United States in this format has intensified, and exchange activities with ONG members are now held annually.⁴⁵

⁴² "Partnership for Peace: Presentation Document," Serbian Army, last updated 2007, accessed November 16, 2023, https://www.vs.rs/sr_cyr/medjunarodna-saradnja/partnerstvo-za-mir/prezentacioni-dokument. – in Serbian

⁴³ "Commander of the Ohio National Guard: The Serbian Armed Forces Are Extremely Professional," VOA, October 12, 2007, accessed November 16, 2023, www.glasamerike.net/a/a-34-2007-10-11-voa18-86841267/743674.html. – in Serbian

⁴⁴ "Joint Training of Members of the Serbian Armed Forces and the Ohio National Guard," Government of the Republic of Serbia, September 20, 2007, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/74257/zajednicka-obuka-pripadnika-vojske-srbije-i-nacionalne-garde-ohaja.php>. – in Serbian

⁴⁵ "Completed Joint Training of Serbian and American Special Forces," *Official Website of the Serbian Army*, July 22, 2011, accessed November 16, 2023, https://www.vs.rs/sr_lat/vesti/030DE60E0585102FAA04000C29270931/zavrshena-zajednicka-obuka-srpskih-i-americkih-specijalaca. – in Serbian

Further, Serbia participated in the following multilateral military exercises within the PfP: *Noble Comet 2*; *Steadfast Move*; *Steadfast Jaw* (2007); *Cooperative Lancer* (2008, 2009, 2012); *Cooperative Longbow* (2008, 2009, 2012); *Cooperative Archer*; *Steadfast Joist* (2009); *Steadfast Juncture* (2011, 2012); *Steadfast Jazz*; *Vigilant Skies*; *Gordian Knot* (2013); *Anaconda*; *Trident Lance* (2014); *REGEX* (2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 – hosted by Serbia); *Trident Jaguar* (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018); *Naples Journey* (2015); *Trident Juncture* (2015, 2018); the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) “Crna Gora” (2016)⁴⁶; EADRCC “Bosna i Hercegovina” (2017); EADRCC “Srbija” (2018).⁴⁷

The armed forces of the Republic of Serbia had notable and prominent participation in the *Neighbors* military exercise in 2019. These exercises have been conducted since 2011, with the participation of military personnel from Serbia, Hungary, and the ONG, aiming to improve communication, coordination, combat readiness, and activities in peacekeeping missions.⁴⁸

In 2019, Serbia also hosted a military exercise with members of the Ground Forces of the U.S. European Command, *Vigilant Wolf 19*, and “the goal of the exercise was to improve the interoperability and mutual understanding of the members of the armies at the tactical level, during the execution of the peace support operation in a multinational environment.”⁴⁹ In the same year, the armed forces of the Republic of Serbia participated in the *Platinum Lion 19* military exercise in Bulgaria, which also hosted the *Shabla 2019* exercise.⁵⁰

The Pattern of Behavior of the Balkan States in International Military Cooperation

As can be seen from the brief summary of the participation of the Balkan states in international military exercises, the region has significant cooperation with NATO. During the 1990s and the wartime period, the newly formed states opted

⁴⁶ Igor Novaković and Marko Savković, “Serbia and NATO – Partnership for Peace” (Belgrade: ISAC Fund International and Security Affairs Centre, 2019), 69, www.isac-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Srbija-i-NATO-Partnerstvo-za-mir.pdf.

⁴⁷ NATO Military Liaison Office Belgrade, “12th Anniversary 2006–2018,” Allied Joint Force Command Naples, Publication, 2018, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/resources/site7614/General/downloads/NATO2018.pdf>.

⁴⁸ “Exercise Neighbours 2019,” Serbian Armed Forces, June 6, 2019, accessed November 16, 2023, www.vs.rs/en/news/6CCC18CD887C11E9B2180050568F5424/exercise-neighbours-2019. – in Serbian

⁴⁹ “Multinational Exercise Watchful Wolf Completed on the 19th,” Serbian Armed Forces, May 23, 2019, accessed November 16, 2023, https://www.vs.rs/sr_lat/vesti/B900BDD87D6B11E9B2180050568F5424/završena-multinacionalna-vezba-obazrivuk-19. – in Serbian

⁵⁰ Scott Bigley, “Marines with FASTER Participate in Platinum Lion 2019,” U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa / U.S. Sixth Fleet, July 25, 2019, accessed November 17, 2023, www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/News-Display/Article/1916075/marines-with-fasteur-participate-in-platinum-lion-2019/.

to cooperate with the only remaining bloc after the Cold War, which had previously been perceived as a threat. With the United States as the leading global power, NATO intervened on several occasions through direct military engagement in the territories of the former Yugoslavia affected by war. At the same time, peace initiatives were launched at various levels under the leadership of the United Nations, which also relied on the alliance and its individual members to carry out many activities in the field.

The narratives that emerged in the newly formed states labeled the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and its army as the aggressor, a perception that remains rooted to this day in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This classification served as the foundation for their new identities, positioning them as victims and the FRY as the abuser. As a result, NATO came to be seen as a protector that saved the people of these countries from aggression and enabled them to gain independence. This is also evident in Kosovo, where NATO's intervention in 1999 continues to shape the region's outlook today.⁵¹

According to the theory, the pattern described in international military cooperation—particularly in military exercises—by most post-Yugoslav states can be seen as bandwagoning with the prevailing power. The logic behind this behavior corresponds to the strength, status, and role of these newly formed states, which were very limited, especially following the devastation of war. Additionally, this behavior was consistent with the structure of the unipolar international system at the time, with one dominant power in the NATO bloc.

However, not all Balkan countries followed this behavior consistently, as seen with Serbia. The fact that Serbia officially declares itself a neutral country indicates that its alliance policy deviates from classic bandwagoning behavior. On the other hand, Serbia's level of cooperation with NATO, reflected in a series of joint military exercises, gives the impression of bandwagoning. However, due to its history, geographical position, and public perception of NATO—largely negative due to the 1999 events and the unresolved issue of Kosovo—Serbia occasionally cooperates with countries that NATO perceives as rivals. Apart from NATO, the most important partners for Serbia in international military cooperation are Russia and China. Its partnership with these countries has intensified with the rise of global rivalry between them and the Western powers.

As part of its international military cooperation, particularly in procuring weapons, Serbia often expands its circle of partner countries beyond the NATO environment. On several occasions since 2006, Serbia has received donations of military equipment from Russia and China, which have often been criticized by NATO countries. However, what sets Serbia apart from other Western Balkan countries is its direct participation in military exercises with the Russian military.

The first such exercise since 2014, the year of Russia's annexation of Crimea, was *Srem 2014*, which marked a turning point in Serbia's military relations and

⁵¹ "Law on Veterans, Serbia as an Aggressor and Possible Consequences," *Politics*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/393815/Zakon-o-braniteljima-Srbija-kao-agresor-i-moguće-posledice>. – in Serbian

the beginning of intensified cooperation with Russia.⁵² At the time, it appeared that Serbia, encouraged by a more assertive Russia, was actively strengthening its efforts to balance its military cooperation with the West. Accordingly, since 2015, Serbia has actively participated alongside Russia and Belarus in the *Slavic Brotherhood* military exercise and hosted it twice – in 2016 and 2019.⁵³

In 2021, Serbia and Russia participated in the anti-terrorist exercise *Joint Response*, held simultaneously with the NATO military exercise *Defender Europe 21*.⁵⁴ NATO and other Western partners expressed significant dissatisfaction with Serbia's actions, which became particularly evident in 2020 when Serbia withdrew from the *Slavic Brotherhood* exercise under strong pressure from certain EU countries, which are also NATO members. Despite this, military activities resumed the following year.⁵⁵

Although the number of military exercises and cooperation with Russia are significantly lower than those with NATO, the Serbian public and media have paid much more attention to Serbia's partnership with Russia.⁵⁶ Regarding military cooperation with China, Serbia planned to participate in joint military exercises in 2020; however, the exercise was not organized due to EU pressure.⁵⁷

This behavior of the Republic of Serbia is influenced by several factors, with one of the most important being the unresolved issue of Kosovo and the support that the majority of NATO members provide for its independence. Additionally, there is widespread dissatisfaction among the Serbian population regarding cooperation with NATO due to historical grievances. According to theory, Serbia's approach to international military cooperation is an example of an attempt to balance the predominant power that previously shaped the regional order in contrast to Serbian national interests. However, since Serbia is neither a great

⁵² Vesna Anđić, "The First Military Exercise of Serbia and Russia," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, November 14, 2014, accessed November 17, 2023, www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/prva-vojna-vezba-srbije-i-rusije/26692162.html. – in Serbian

⁵³ "Exercise 'Slavic Brotherhood 2021'," *Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia*, June 9, 2021, accessed November 17, 2023, www.mod.gov.rs/cir/17486/vezba-slovensko-bratstvo-2021-17486. – in Serbian

⁵⁴ Predrag Urošević, "Police and Military Exercises in the Balkans: Russians in Serbia, Surrounded by the USA," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, May 21, 2021, accessed November 17, 2023, www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vojne-vjezbe-balkan-srbija-rusi-amerika/31266689.html.

⁵⁵ Nebojša Vuković, "Military Cooperation Between Serbia and Russia – Status and Prospects," *International Politics* 74, no. 1187 (2023): 59-80, 69, https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_mp.2023.74.1187.3. – in Serbian

⁵⁶ Aleksandar Ivković, "Fifteen Years of Serbia's Membership in the Partnership for Peace: Cooperation with NATO Is Stable, the Public Is Not Informed," *European Western Balkans Center*, August 31, 2021, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/petnaest-godina-clanstva-srbije-u-partnerstvu-za-mir-saradnja-sa-nato-om-stabilna-javnost-neobavestena/>. – in Serbian

⁵⁷ "Serbian Military in First Bilateral Exercises with Chinese, Belarus Forces," *N1*, January 23, 2020, accessed April 18, 2024, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/a563060-serbian-military-in-first-bilateral-exercises-with-chinese-belarus-forces/>.

power nor a country with decisive influence on the global distribution of power, this does not constitute a true case of balancing as defined in theory. Nevertheless, at the regional level, Serbia's actions are a good example of balancing in an effort to pursue its interests and gain a stronger position and an important role.

However, from the perspective of Russia and China, which can be classified as great powers, Serbia's participation in their military exercises is not only a manifestation of the influence they exert on the Serbian public and their presence in the Balkans but also an attempt to maintain the balance of power, thereby further securing their interests in the region. The impact of such actions on regional security dynamics varies. The cooperation of all regional countries with NATO and participation in numerous joint military exercises that include Serbia opens the possibility of rapprochement, maintaining a stable region, and improved relations between countries and peoples.

On the other hand, Serbia's periodic balancing with Russia and China is not an expression of resistance to regional integration and cooperation, nor opposition to NATO, but rather an aspiration to gain a better position in negotiations regarding the status of Kosovo and with other global partners. After February 2022 and Russia's intervention in Ukraine, Serbia imposed a moratorium on military exercises with all partners.⁵⁸ However, this moratorium was interrupted by the *Platinum Wolf 2023* exercise with NATO countries, held on Serbian territory, once again demonstrating the currently prevailing influence of major powers in the region.

Conclusion

Based on the presented short analysis of the behavior of post-Yugoslav countries in international military cooperation through military exercises, it can be concluded that the biggest bilateral partner of these countries is the United States, while their main multinational partner is NATO. Following the theoretical framework of balancing and bandwagoning, most post-Yugoslav states' behavior after Yugoslavia's dissolution can be described as bandwagoning – aligning with the stronger power in the system. It should be noted that states can exhibit different types of behavior in different forms of cooperation and that balancing and bandwagoning represent two extremes on a spectrum.

Unlike other post-Yugoslav states, Serbia is unique in terms of its history and development of cooperation with NATO, as their relations have been marked by serious upheavals. To gain influence, secure a better position, and maintain its principled stance of neutrality, Serbia deviated from the established patterns of military cooperation seen in other countries in the region by participating in military exercises with Russia. The first attempt at a joint exercise with China was unsuccessful due to the pandemic and increased pressure from the European

⁵⁸ "Are We Facing the Lifting of the Moratorium?: Joint Military Exercises between Serbia and NATO Announced after Stoltenberg's Visit," *Euronews Serbia*, November 22, 2022, www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/105775/da-li-nas-ceka-ukidanje-moratorijuma-posle-posete-stoltenberga-najavljene-zajednicke-vojne-vezbe-srbije-i-nato/vest. – in Serbian

Union. Serbia's policy, in this case, can be evaluated as pragmatic. It employs both balancing and bandwagoning tactics depending on changes in the international system, an approach made possible by its proclaimed neutrality, which manifests as active neutrality.

In the current constellation of forces and international circumstances, most post-Yugoslav countries have opted for the bandwagoning approach. This has led to increased cooperation and rapprochement between these countries, not only on a global level but also within the region. This behavior and dominant alignment with NATO have contributed to maintaining the established regional order, although it may be challenged due to unresolved issues such as the status of Kosovo, the position of the Republic of Srpska, and Serbia's stronger balancing approach. Although Serbia seeks to present itself as an actor capable of choosing its partners, it has become evident in practice that its rising balancing strategy is constrained by its security environment and the necessity to work closely with NATO, the main international actor responsible for maintaining general peace and stability in the region.

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