

How China's "Balkans Silk Road" Could Resurrect Russia's South Stream

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China is [extending its Silk Road](#) into the Balkans, with a [planned project](#) to construct a railroad from the Greek port of Piraeus all the way to Budapest. This would connect Beijing's primary port of entrance for its commercial goods to one of Central Europe's main transport conduits, thereby pushing the Silk Road into the heart of Europe and throughout the rest of the continent. As with everything else that China is doing in the world today, it must not be discounted that Russia can also reap some resultant benefits from this as part of the global [Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership](#), which in this case, would allow for the resurrection of the South Stream project that all of its European partners have been [begging for](#) since its cancellation.

The Gamble

The possibility exists that South Stream can be reborn along a slightly modified route, closely following the Chinese railroad through Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. There would be scant legal difficulties with the final Serbian and Hungarian portions (Budapest was previously [resolute](#) in defying all EU dictates), and non-EU-member Macedonia would not be beholden to Brussels' mandates concerning the [troublesome](#) Third Energy Package, leaving only Greece and its EU membership as the main obstacle in getting the project off the ground. There are, however, two large gambles that can change the existing equation and allow for South Stream to be built through Greek territory:

A Complete 'Grexit':

If Greece completely withdraws from the EU, not just [in terms of the EuroZone](#) but out of everything the arrangement entails, then it wouldn't be beholden to the Third Energy Package and South Stream could theoretically restart construction almost immediately afterwards once an agreement is reached with Athens. Of course, this is the most extreme scenario and doesn't appear to be on the horizon, but with many grassroots activists still [literally up in arms](#) and their collective anger ever growing, the situation may spill over into a repeat of [2012's violence](#), especially if the EU enacts some kind of asymmetrical 'punishment' over an economic 'Grexit'. This could lead to many unintended aftereffects that could make a full 'Grexit' appear mild by comparison.

A Russian-Turkish Strategic Partnership:

A more probable alternative towards resurrecting South Stream would be the enactment of a Russian-Turkish Strategic Partnership epitomized in coordinated moves throughout the Balkan energy sector. Specifically, what is envisioned here is a structural workaround in order to avoid the constraints of the Third Energy Package by technically separating the

supplier from the distributor, whereby Russia would continue to supply the gas but it would be distributed through a Turkish company. Moscow would only go forward with this major move if it was sure that Ankara could be trusted upon not to repeat the Ukrainian scenario, which would mean that Turkey should properly understand the immense mutual benefits (economic, political, strategic) that such a condominium would entail and the heightened damage to its own interests that would ensue if it sabotaged the joint operation.

Such a Russian-Turkish Strategic Partnership, the necessary prerequisite to this scenario, could already be in the making. Turkey already made a strong statement over its [intended multipolar orientation](#) through agreeing to host the New South Stream in the first place, and if a Russian-Turkish understanding can be reached over Syria (and Turkey is showing some [vague signs](#) of this), then a strategic partnership would be the next logical step. As astonishing as this narrative may seem to some readers, it mustn't be ignored, since Turkey is currently undergoing a transformative shift in its self-identity and geopolitical awareness, and the global transition to multipolarity is having a strong residual effect on its leadership's future calculations.

Throwing The Odds

Provided that a decision is made to resurrect South Stream via the Greek-Macedonian route, then there are two main issues that could threaten the project's survival, both of which may realistically be exacerbated by Western forces in pursuit of their anti-Russian objectives:

Greek Nationalism:

No matter which form it takes, be it the leftist strain of Syriza or the right-wing rhetoric of Golden Dawn, Greece is notably becoming more nationalistic, and this portends a major problem for any future resurrection of South Stream.

Against Turkey:

Greece and Turkey have historically been bitter rivals, and the unresolved disputes over the [Aegean Islands](#) and [Northern Cyprus](#) are serious hurdles to any large-scale joint cooperation between them such as restoring South Stream. These problems can easily be manipulated by outside forces to produce an even stronger zeitgeist of anti-Turkish sentiment that would make any Greek-Turkish deal politically impossible for Athens. Of course, *the [Trans-Adriatic Pipeline](#) that intends to carry [moderate amounts of Azeri gas](#) to Southern Europe via Turkey and Greece also has the same socio-political vulnerability, but because it is fully backed by the US and EU, Greece's overlords will do whatever they can to make sure that it doesn't fall victim to any nationalist reactions against the Russian-led project.*

Against Macedonia:

The second front where Greek nationalism threatens to derail any revival of South Stream is with Macedonia, which has been engaged in a [heated naming dispute](#) with Athens ever since its [inception as a Socialist Federative Republic in Yugoslavia](#) after World War II. This controversy has reached such a level that it has prevented Macedonia's closer movement to the EU or NATO (the latter of which has wielded unofficial protectorate status over the country ever since 2001's '[Operation Essential Harvest](#)'), two developments that would have already been foregone conclusions had it not been for the dispute. *It is not known exactly*

which form Greek resistance to the Macedonian leg of the pipeline may take, but considering the magnitude of emotions on the Greek side over this issue (and the country's two-decade long campaign of halting Macedonia's integration with other entities to spite it from the 'benefits'), it's all but sure that something may predictably come in the way of these plans.

Albanian Nationalism:

The second major impediment to a reiteration of South Stream is Albanian nationalism, which itself presents one of the [greatest threats](#) to overall European security due to the fact that its alliance with NATO could be activated in the event of conflicts with Serbia or Macedonia. Addressing the latter, ethnic Albanians form nearly [a quarter of the country's population](#) and have privileged political representation as a result of the NATO-drafted [Ohrid Agreement](#) that concluded Operation 'Essential Harvest'. By that agreement, most political processes in Macedonia must have the approval of over half of the country's minority representatives (who are guaranteed proportional representation by the same document), thereby meaning that the Albanian minority can basically hold the wishes of the majority population hostage if they or their NATO patrons in Tirana so choose.

Not only that, but large-scale ethnic disturbances or terrorist attacks on par with those of early 2001 could also break out. Last year [reminded Macedonians](#) of the fragility of their country's ethnic relations after [Albanians rioted in Skopje](#) following the resolution of a [controversial court case](#). Six ethnic Albanians were found guilty for carrying out a terrorist attack in which they killed five ethnic Macedonians during Orthodox Easter in 2012, highlighting the fears the nation has over that [minority group's radicalization](#) in recent years. Albanian nationalism is simmering in Macedonia, and a political radical and former politician even attempted to [declare an independent 'Republic of Ilirida'](#) for ethnic Albanians in September that he intended would form part of a new federalized state. Although not taken seriously at the time, there are concerns that it could gain wider support in the future if the situation continues spiraling out of control, and a repeat of the Kosovo events is certainly not off the table. It's easy to imagine a scenario where NATO-supported Albania coaxes its ethnic comrades across the border to carry out precisely that plan in order to obstruct any future Russian attempt to resurrect South Stream alongside China's Balkan Silk Road through the country.

China As The Balkans Bookie

As challenging as the abovementioned threats may seem, they are not insurmountable, and the key to overcoming them may rest with China. The sheer amount of money that the country is known for throwing around in order to promote its trade links across the world ([notably in Africa](#)) has earned it the reputation of being able to smooth over almost any political difference imaginable between its partners. It's expected that this will be no different as it seeks to use the Balkans as a bridgehead to conquering the European marketplace. Being the 'middleman' between the Balkan 'gamblers' and Russia-Turkey, China can help grease everyone's palms in order to reach as peaceful of an accommodation as possible, should it have an interest in doing so (which it arguably seems to).

Chinese capital and investment (including cash to on-the-fence politicians and potential rabble-rousers) could soothe the effects of reactionary nationalism in Greece and Albania, both of which Beijing has courted influence with in recent years. Greece, as mentioned at the beginning of the article, is home to the port of Piraeus that welcomes most of the

Chinese goods that enter Europe, and China and Albania have lately sought to actively rekindle their ties via [cultural](#), [transport](#), and [agricultural](#) projects to restore their [vaunted Cold War-era relationship](#) that existed prior to the [Sino-Albanian split](#) in 1978.

Through these deep and developing partnerships, China can exercise a moderating influence on the respective Balkan countries to prevent them or their more extreme elements from disrupting any restoration of South Stream alongside the Balkan Silk Road that Beijing is building through their territories. It's not a guaranteed panacea to all externally managed provocations, but given the strength and success of the Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership thus far (and its heightened importance under current conditions), it's likely to play a stabilizing factor in the region if the decision is taken to continue South Stream sometime in the future.


Hit Big Or Lose Big Time

The prospective Russian-Chinese-Turkish nexus in the Balkans is the type of gamble that will likely result only in extreme dividends for those who have the courage to play, with the multipolar world betting against the unipolar one. The former has a vested interest in seeing South Stream re-enter the Balkans, whereas the latter would be more than happy for it to fail on all fronts. The following assessment is drawn from the vantage point of multipolarity:

Hitting Big:

The reestablishment of the South Stream project, albeit through Greece and Macedonia instead of Bulgaria, would lead to a Russian-Turkish Strategic Partnership that could interact with and stabilize the Balkans on a similar level as the Russian-Chinese one does with Central Asia. This basically boils down to Russia and Turkey having influence over their various civilizational/religious spheres, with Russia holding sway over the Orthodox domains (except for Romania, although tempering their recalcitrant politicians and society into a more pragmatic mentality is definitely a long-term objective) while Turkey influences the Muslim ones such as Albania and Bosnia. China would be the financial overseer in this relationship that would have privileged relations with all due to its historical absence from the Balkans and the fact that it isn't tainted nor advantaged by such a legacy. Its cash could grease over any kinks in the Russian-Turkish 'engine' and help smooth out the process of the Great Multipolar Powers entering Europe's doorstep via the Balkans and directly confronting the unipolar Western world on one of its home turfs.

Losing Big Time:

Conversely, such a grand strategy is fraught with extreme risk, as the US and NATO would never allow it to succeed without applying the greatest amount of realistic pushback possible. It would begin within Anatolia through 'Operation Take Down Turkey', which is the author's name for the US' plan to  geopolitically dismember Turkey if it ever gets out of control and radically moves away from the Western unipolar consensus (which is what it would be doing by establishing a Russian-Chinese-Turkish nexus in the Balkans, whether or not it formally leaves NATO). *The [Kurdish Card](#) is the most predictable option at play here, and given its enormous geographic and demographic implications, it's surely an existential threat that Ankara must take with all seriousness in mind.*

Should this danger be mitigated, then the anti-multipolar front would retreat back every step along the line of the proposed pipeline route, activating various levers of 'scorched

earth' resistance in its wake. The second stage would be to instigate a crisis in Turkish-Greek relations in order to endanger the pipeline's first international point of entry, but if that is also overcome or avoided, then the Greek-Macedonian issue would become the next point of contention. Continuing onward, if the pipeline enters the South Slavic country, then the Albanians could be harnessed to wage a massive destabilization campaign that could turn the country into the Black Hole of the Balkans.

Moving northwards, extreme Euro-Atlantic rhetoric emanating from Sarajevo could be used as a purposeful provocation to tempt Republika Srpska into secession from Bosnia-Herzegovina, which would by itself destabilize the Western Balkans and potentially draw Serbia either into a renewed conflict or international isolation. Finally, *the West could 'cork the bottle' by removing Hungary's Viktor Orban from power via a [Color Revolution](#) a replacing him with a liberal-nationalist individual (cut from the [Navalny cloth](#)) who would simultaneously restore the country's pro-Western path while inflaming ethnic tensions in Serbia's [Hungarian-minority Vojvodina](#) province.*

All in all, short of a major war between the unipolar and multipolar worlds, the former will be using whichever insidious and indirect mechanisms it can muster to prolong its hegemonic moment and prevent the latter from entering Europe's geopolitically vulnerable underbelly in the Balkans.

Concluding Thoughts

One of the central tenets of the [Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership](#) is that where one goes, the other follows, and this is certainly expected to be the case in the Balkans with the Beijing-built Silk Road railway that will connect Greece to Hungary. Russia has a unique opportunity to revive the South Stream pipeline (to complement the LNG facility in Turkey) by snaking it across Greece and Macedonia along the Balkan Silk Road and onwards to the Serbian hub that it was originally anticipated to connect to before the project was scrapped. Such a vision would necessitate a Russian-Turkish Strategic Partnership to supplement the Russian-Chinese one, and eventually, the workings of a trilateral multipolar condominium over the Balkans would be created in order to help the plan succeed. Of course, the unipolar world would not take this geopolitical affront with a smile and is expected to repel the project in every asymmetrical way that it is capable of. If Russia-China-Turkey decide to gamble the fate of the multipolar world in the Balkans, they may find that it is certainly a risk worth taking and it could eventually make the West crap out and go bust.

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