

Hybrid Wars: Breaking the Balkans

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(Please reference the entire [Law of Hybrid War](#) series in order to get acquainted with the strategic themes of this article)

Reconceptualizing The Balkan Peninsula

The Balkans are the most geostrategically important region in Europe today, and truth be told, they've held this role for centuries before, despite whether or not various Great Powers acknowledged this at the time. The purpose of the current study isn't to meticulously analyze the past, but to define the present and forecast the future. The cusp of their contemporary importance is in serving as a geographic facilitator for two Russian and Chinese megaprojects that aim to penetrate the 'unipolar continent' with unshakable multipolar influence, and herein lays the reason why they're the second most likely to fall victim to Hybrid War. All of this will be thoroughly described in the proceeding sections and parts, but prior to that point, it's absolutely necessary for the reader to reconceptualize their understanding of the Balkans in order to better comprehend the strategic logic behind Moscow and Beijing's ambitious geo-economic plans.

Geo-historical Importance

The Balkans have played such a paramount role in Europe history mostly because they're the land bridge connecting Central and Western Europe with Turkey and the Mideast. Accordingly, both forces have been able to use its territory in order to project influence in either direction, with the Romans treating Greece as a stepping stone to further eastward conquest, while the Ottomans exploited the more mainland portions of the region to climactically charge into the heart of Europe prior to their decisive defeat during the 1683 Battle of Vienna. It's thus indisputable that the Balkan Peninsula has historically been the geo-pivotal hinge in leveraging European and Mideast influence vis-à-vis one another, but there's another factor that needs to be mentioned, and that's Russia's civilizational links to the region.

Most of the Balkans are tied to Russia through the intimate links of religious, linguistic, ethnic, and historical bonds, with the latter being most strongly epitomized through [Tsar Alexander II's liberation campaign in the region from 1877-1878](#). As per the latter, the geopolitical designs that Russia had at the time are exceptionally controversial and outside the focus of this analysis, but it's relevance in being included in this section is in showing that the Eastern Balkans (Romania, Bulgaria) served as a bridge in physically connecting Russia to the Mideast (Turkey), which culminated in Russian forces briefly reaching the village of San Stefano just a few miles outside of Constantinople.

More recently than that, Russia's Balkan diplomacy in the run-up to World War I and its

alliance with Serbia was reviled by its European counterparts, since they saw it as part of a larger power play in using the Balkans to reach the Adriatic Sea, and by extension, the Mediterranean. Whether or not this was the grand intention or merely a beneficial aftereffect of the alliance is a moot point, since the purpose in bringing this up is to show that Russia, just like the Europeans and Turks, could capitalize on the Balkans' position in order to advance its geostrategic goals and connect with each of these two competing regions. Therefore, when considering the word "Balkans", one should immediately think of the word "bridge", since that's historically been the global purpose that the region has served. The most notable exception to this was when the Macedonian Alexander the Great used the region as a springboard for his legendary eastern conquests, but such a globally renowned feat would never be repeated in the region afterwards.



The Balkans before and after Russo-Turkish war 1877-1878

Geo-Economic Significance

In the contemporary era, the Balkans have less of a traditional military potential and more of an integrational economic one (although the "refugee" crisis is a separate, asymmetrical issue that will certainly be discussed later). With this in mind, one can conceptualize the region as being the relatively disconnected space between the large German, Russian, and Turkish economies. Realistically speaking, however, it's only functionally relevant for connecting Germany and Turkey, as the bulk of Russia's trade with both goes through Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, respectively. Considering this, the EU and NATO's "Drang nach Süden" (Drive to the South) makes a lot more conceptual sense, since it's clear that the US and Germany want to consolidate this region under their full control so as to rebuild the Yugoslav-era connective infrastructure that was purposely destroyed during the 1990s wars.

The grand geo-economic importance that the Balkans have in terms of the German, and by extension, the entire EU economy is therefore obvious. The largest market and economic power in Europe wants to have full direct (EU) and indirect (US-controlled NATO) control of the mainland trade routes with its Mideast counterpart, Turkey, which is the largest market and non-resource-trading economic power in West Asia within overland proximity to the EU. If one recalls history, then this is the exact same principle that motivated the "Berlin-Baghdad Express" in the run-up to World War I and played a premier role in why Germany and its Austrian-Hungarian ally were so adamantly against the projection of Russian influence in the region.

Back then just as now, one of Germany's (and by modern extension, also the US') most pressing strategic imperatives was to establish full control over the Balkan Peninsula and streamline transport routes in accordance with these geo-economic determinants. If a third party (in both cases, Russia, but nowadays supported by China) were to physical insert their influence into the geographic center of this process (Serbia), then it would be seen as a critical strategic vulnerability that would have to be countered at all costs. Failure to do so would place the future lifeline of German-Turkish trade (seen more broadly in this context as EU-Mideast non-resource trade) under the influence of a non-party entity that could presumably manipulate this arrangement to their grand strategic benefit (presently seen as the advancement of multipolar influence at unipolar expense).

Sub-Regional Categorizations

It's important at this confluence to clearly articulate what one is talking about when they speak of "the Balkans". Geographically, this refers to the Balkan Peninsula, generally recognized as being the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece. More specifically, however, there's a certain connotation used among many commentators when referencing this term, and they oftentimes use it interchangeably with the countries of the former Yugoslavia. That's not the case with the present author, however, since "the Balkans" is meant to refer to the entire geographic space that it's naturally defined as. Adding context to this definition is the categorization of three sub-regional geopolitical modifications within the Balkan space, which are necessary to describe in order for the reader to have a richer understanding of how their dynamics.

The following descriptions are taken from the author's earlier work about "[A New Strategic Calculus For The Balkans](#)":

The Western Balkans:

This designation refers to the unipolar controlled states that are geographically part of the peninsula's western extremities. They include Slovenia, Croatia, the Croat-Muslim portion of Bosnia, and Albania. Geographically speaking, Montenegro also falls into this category, but its population's brave resistance to the unilateral decision of their government offers hope that it could represent a Central Balkan geopolitical breakthrough in the future.

The Central Balkans:

This part of the peninsula not under the formal control of either of the pro-American institutions represents the most fertile ground for multipolarity to take root, and it includes Republika Srpska in Bosnia, Serbia, and the Republic of Macedonia. These states cleanly overlap with their geographic designation, with the only sub-regional anomaly being the temporary occupation of Kosovo Province which thus currently falls under the geopolitical influence of the Central Balkans (and hence, the unipolar world).

The Eastern Balkans:

Romania and Bulgaria comprise this geopolitical designation, and it's under the complete control of both unipolar organizations. Geopolitical events here are a lot less dynamic than in the other portions of the peninsula, with the only dynamic typically being the inverse relationship between a decline in the economy and increased American military buildup.

The Greek Connection:

In both the geographic and geopolitical senses, Greece is connected to each of the Balkan sub-groupings. It physically connects to the Western, Central, and Eastern Balkans when one looks at it from the perspective of geography, and in terms of New Cold War loyalties, it's basically split between the unipolar and multipolar camps. Greece has always had a sense of "separateness" when compared to its other Balkan brethren, and this hodgepodge of uncertain categorizations only accentuates that further.

Situational Analysis of the Balkan Sub-Regions

Having described the Balkans' sub-regional designations, it's now appropriate to provide a

short analysis of their strategic situations. This will aid the reader in understanding the present state of affairs and making sense out of Russia and China's selection of the Central Balkans as the location for their two megaprojects.

The Western Balkans:

Categorized in order of strategic utility to the US, the two equally most important members of the Western Balkans vis-à-vis unipolar strategy are Albania and Croatia, both of which are capable of exerting influence beyond their borders. Albania can do so in the occupied Serbian Province of Kosovo and the western regions of the Republic of Macedonia, while Croatia does something similar over the Croat-Muslim part of Bosnia (although to a lesser extent than Albania can do in its targets). In both cases, there's an element of "greater" nationhood being expressed, and it's specifically promoted in order to destabilize the Central Balkan states of Serbia and Macedonia. It must also be reminded that both Western Balkan leaders had their irredentist aspirations briefly actualized by the fascist occupiers in World War II, and the nightmarish memory of "Greater Albania" and "Greater Croatia" still hasn't been forgotten by the Macedonians and Serbs that torturously suffered under it.

✘ The next most important Western Balkan proxy is Bosnia, but it's saliency lies not in what it can do to promote unipolarity, but in how it can be used to break multipolarity by instigating yet another Balkan War. This will be explored more in-depth at further points in the research, but for now it's relevant for the reader to acknowledge that the country is essentially split between two unipolar and multipolar sub-national groups - the pro-Western Croat-Muslim entity, and the multipolar Republika Srpska. This arrangement is due to the Dayton Accords that ended the Bosnian Civil War and federalized the country, but the US and its allies are now alarmingly taking steps to revise this agreement and potentially make a move against Republika Srpska's legally enshrined autonomy within the country. Therefore, in the greater scheme of things, Bosnia should be seen as one large geopolitical trigger that the US could activate against Serbia (and by indirect effect, Russia) in order to create a scorched earth-type of physical and strategic situation to sabotage Balkan multipolarity and the actualization of Russia and China's megaprojects if it feels that all other options have been exhausted.

Moving along, Montenegro follows Bosnia in terms of importance to the Western Balkan construction. Although a tiny and demographically insignificant state when compared to the other three that have already been mentioned already, and without any "greater" nationhood ambitions or conventional proxy trigger uses that could be weaponized by the unipolar world, Montenegro still plays a very strategic role. By virtue of its geographic location, its 2006 separation from Serbia turned the latter into a landlocked state and increased the multitude of pressuring already been expressed against it. This was made possible by Milo Djukanovic's nearly three-decades-long rule, which has been a textbook example of a proxy leader following the geopolitical biddings of his masters. Most tellingly, he and some of his governing cohorts unilaterally made the preemptive decision to accept NATO membership in September *even before it was ever offered* in order to publicly demonstrate his loyalty to the West. This had the predictable reaction of instigating a nationwide rebellion among the majority of the citizenry that adamantly stands against such a humiliatingly servile measure as joining the military bloc that bombed it in 1999, and the ongoing tension between the masses and the master will be expounded upon later in the analysis.

Finally, the last member of the Western Balkans in terms of importance is Slovenia, but it didn't always used to be that way. Back in the 1990s it was the 'shining star' of the Balkans, having escaped the ravages of war unscathed due to its lucky location in the peninsula's geographic extremity, and to a large extent, it still has the region's best standard of living. Slovenia's success can be attributed to it being a small state (both in geographic and demographic terms) with proportionately developed economic assets, and this particular combination made it the envy of many in the region. Unfortunately, quite a few people (including influential decision makers) misunderstood the secrets behind its success and felt that they could be emulated in their own countries if only they followed Slovenia's institutional lead and moved as close to the West as possible. They mistakenly attributed its stability to its closeness with the EU and NATO, not to its unique domestic and historical conditions, and were purposely misled into thinking that joining both organizations would lead their country into a period of Slovene-like prosperity. The US manipulated this artificially engineered and widely promoted perception in order to secure Croatia's membership into NATO and the EU in 2009 and 2013 respectively, which thenceforth largely expended Slovenia's strategic significance to its plans.

The Central Balkans:

This newly conceptualized geopolitical region is the most important in terms of multipolar potential, but correspondingly, this also makes it the greatest target for destabilization. The socio-political vulnerabilities of its three states will be discussed in Part II, so at this point it's relevant to only explain the general characteristics of each. Beginning with the northernmost, Republika Srpska is the proud portion of Bosnia that has remained largely free from unipolar influences. Having been the victim of Western aggression during the 1994 bombing campaign (ironically waged under "humanitarian" pretenses), its people and leadership are hostile to NATO and very suspicious of the EU. More than anything, however, they appreciate their entity's hard-fought autonomy and will do anything to safeguard its existence. They're keenly aware of Sarajevo and its allies' efforts to subtly and gradually abolish it, so they're always on defensive alert for new provocations. Importantly, Republika Srpska is squeezed between NATO-member Croatia and the NATO protectorate being exercised over the Croat-Muslim part of Bosnia, so it remains militarily vulnerable in the event of renewed hostilities. Nevertheless, this hasn't had the intimidating effect that the West may have anticipated, since President Milorad Dodik has confidently continued to assert his entity's sovereignty and doesn't seem inclined to back down.

Moving along, Serbia sits at the center of both the Central Balkans construction and the Balkan Peninsula as a whole, thus making it the pivot of the entire region, and this despite the decades-long War on Serbia that's led to the gradual reduction of its administered territory. As a result of the American-supported "Operation Storm" in 1995, Croatia ethnically cleansed hundreds of thousands of Serbs from the Republic of Serbian Krajina in the modern-day eastern reaches of the country, and then followed up with a devastating joint strike together with Bosnia aimed at crippling Republika Srpska. The Republic of Serbian Krajina was obliterated, while Republika Srpska was forced into a federation with the Croat-Muslim portion of Bosnia and Belgrade's formal influence was removed from the region. Afterwards, NATO launched the War on Yugoslavia in 1999 in order to sever the Province of Kosovo from Serbia, and the 2006 independence referendum initiated by pro-Western stooge Djukanovic removed Montenegro from the mix and resulted in Serbia's current situation. At present, its government is split between unipolar (the Prime Minister) and multipolar (the President) representatives, and it's somewhat clumsily trying to

maneuver between East and West. Despite these setbacks and the asymmetrical aggression currently being waged against it by the manufactured and purposely guided “refugee” crisis (to be analyzed in full later), Serbia still remains the strategic core for Balkan integration (be it for the Central Balkans or the entire region).



Republika Srpska Krajina map

Bringing up the southern component of the Central Balkans is the Republic of Macedonia. This country’s geopolitical and geophysical location critically enables it to function as the connecting bridge between the Greek ports and the Central Balkan inlands (and further afield to Hungary and Germany), and it’s absolutely the main chokepoint in north-south regional trade. It’s also the most popularly traversed transit state in the “refugee” crisis partly because of its convenient geography. As it currently stands, Skopje is “officially” pro-Western and wants to join unipolar institutions, but the population is growing ever suspicious of the EU and NATO after the May 2015 Color Revolution attempt, and the government also has a pragmatic and mutually beneficial relationship with Russia. Macedonia’s pivotal position in the south-central Balkans has made it the subject of fierce competition between neighboring powers. The expansionist ideologies of Greater Albania and Greater Bulgaria still lay claim to its territory and even briefly succeeded in politically extinguishing it during their joint fascist-era occupation. Both unofficially irredentist governments still harbor hegemonic ambitions over it to this day, but according to patriotic Macedonians, the Greeks are currently the most hostile of the bunch because they refuse to recognize their country by its constitutional name and, as some assert, continue to occupy Aegean Macedonia. The relevancy of each of these claims is particularly poignant when examining the complex Hybrid War scenarios facing Macedonia, and will come to the surface later as part of the country’s diverse socio-political vulnerabilities.

The Eastern Balkans:

To begin with, Romania is geographically the largest Balkan state, but per the research’s focus on Hybrid War, it’s the least of the least of the countries affected by this. Bucharest largely abstains from Balkan affairs, and when it does interact in the region, it’s primarily only with its neighboring EU and NATO ally Bulgaria, which together form what the author has termed the “[Black Sea Bloc](#)” of Intermarum anti-Russian mobilization. Romania cares much more about Moldova and the Hungarian minority within its borders than it does about Serbia or any of the other examined Central and Western Balkan states, but its basing of American military personnel and anti-missile technology can’t be completely ignored from the regional calculation. That being said, it’s not likely that they’ll be directed westwards, but rather eastwards against Russia and its naval units in the Black Sea and Crimea. Additionally, the US’ occupation of Serbia’s Province of Kosovo through Camp Bondsteel, one of its largest bases, is sufficient enough to project destabilizing influence straight into the heart of the Central Balkans, thus allowing Romanian territory to be used for its previously mentioned strategic purpose against Russia. For the most part, then, Romania will be precluded from the rest of the analysis because its geopolitical focus is more relevant to Hungary, Moldova, the ethnic Romanian-inhabited sliver of Western Ukraine’s Bukovina Region, and Russia, but the same lack of Balkan-oriented policies can’t be said about Bulgaria.



Turkish prisoners of war, taken by the Russian Army in Bucharest, 1878

This South Slavic state had historically enjoyed very close and intimate relations with Russia, be it during the Imperial, Soviet, or present eras, and the groundswell of familial ties remains even to this day. The problem, however, is that the Bulgarian political elite don't share their citizenry's appeal for Russia and are firmly dedicated to Euro-Atlanticism, which dictates that they take all necessary steps to decouple all of their ties from Russia. Since Sofia obviously can't remove the shared civilizational and historical bonds that bind it with Moscow, it must resort to the political-economic sphere instead, and the most pronounced anti-Russian moves to come out of Bulgaria lately were the implementation of sanctions, the rejection of South Stream, and the decision to [base](#) a NATO command center in the country. At the height of the Macedonian Color Revolution attempt in May 2015, it provocatively [moved some of its troops to the border](#), ostensibly to protect against non-existent "terrorists" that might be nearby, but in reality to exert pressure on the country that many in Bulgaria claim as a subordinated extension of their own. Understanding the hegemonic ambitions that Bulgaria harbors towards its neighbor, it's easier to forecast the role that it will have in certain Hybrid War scenarios against Macedonia, and which will certainly be investigated in the coming parts.

The Greek Connection:

The Hellenic Republic has always enjoyed a degree of "separateness" when compared to the other Balkan states, despite sharing some deep similarities with them. The Greek alphabet was the basis for the Cyrillic script crafted by Saints Cyril and Methodius from Macedonia, and Greeks share the same Orthodox faith as most of their Balkan brethren. Nevertheless, there are still many differences between them, and Greeks are very proud of the distinctiveness that separates them from their neighbors. In modern terms, it's notable that Greece was the first Balkan country to be accepted into NATO and the EU, and in geopolitical terms, it's behaved as an Atlanticist bridgehead into the region since the beginning of the Old Cold War. Even so, that might be changing nowadays because the same geography that once allowed the unipolar world to penetrate the Balkans can also be harnessed by the multipolar one for disseminating influence in the dual direction of both the greater peninsula and its southern maritime reaches.

✘ This is why Greece is so geopolitically important in the New Cold War, and Prime Minister Tsipras seemed to masterfully understand his country's privileged position in adroitly balancing between East and West in the months preceding the dramatic run-up to the summer 2015 austerity referendum. Even though he ultimately rejected his people's "Oxi" vote, he didn't lose their full support, indicating that he won a critical enough mass of supporters through his loud rhetoric and visible international exploits in order to remain in power, at least for the time being (which will be expanded on later). Since reaching an agreement with its creditors, Greece has been markedly less active on the global arena, but some of this could be explained by the utterly overwhelming "refugee" crisis that has enveloped the country and necessitated a concentrated focus on domestic affairs. Be that as it may, the West learned its lesson about Tsipras and his geopolitical acumen, hence why it's adamant in exploiting Greece's inner political-economic contradictions so as to keep it divided and unable to actualize its full potential for as long as possible. Despite this, Tsipras' shining example taught Greeks just how critical their country is to global affairs right now, and the 'geopolitical genie' of self-empowerment that released is unlikely to be forgotten by

his countrymen anytime soon.

Geo-Economic Summary of the Balkans' Connective Potential

Greece physically abuts each of the three Balkan sub-regions and could theoretically act as their logistical access points for trade to and from the Mediterranean and further abroad. This is more so the case when it comes to the Central and Eastern Balkans than the Western ones, as the latter have their own Adriatic seaports from which to directly interact with the larger world. From the EU perspective, it's entirely possible to create a north-south trading network between Germany and Turkey that completely circumvents Greece's geographic role, using Serbia-Bulgaria-Turkey instead of Macedonia-Greece-Turkey to facilitate it. The problem with this construction is that it limits the Balkan countries' trade primarily to the two economic nodes that they're between (Germany and Turkey), and the region will never reach its full potential if it's indefinitely trapped as a transit zone and has no significant infrastructural connection to the outside world.

The Greek geography herein plays the ultimate strategically liberating goal in unshackling the Balkans from German-Turkish tutelage and opening up their most direct access to global markets. The Central Balkans are naturally amenable in facilitating connective north-south infrastructure projects such as the one being proposed because of how seamlessly the Serbian and Macedonian valleys give way to the Greek seashore, making this the most practical route for any non-European state eager to gain access to the region and the deeper European hinterland. It will be seen in a forthcoming section exactly how attractive this is to Russia and China, since such a route would not only tie the Balkans closer to the emerging multipolar order, but would use their regional geography to multiply the asymmetrical influence that each Great Power projects into the rest of the continent. Simply put, the Balkans are the backdoor to Europe, and it's for this reason why the US is so anxious to block them off and prevent the Russia and China from gaining any type of tangible foothold there, even if it must resort to scorched-earth Hybrid Wars to do so.

To be continued...

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