

Serbia's Intention to Buy Chinese Weapons. US Concerns

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Belgrade's announcement that it may purchase the Chinese FK-3 anti-aircraft missile system was enough for the U.S. to express concern about Serbia's future, not only with Europe, but with the entire world.

The U.S. Embassy in Belgrade said that

“procuring military and defense equipment is a sovereign decision. However, governments should understand the short- and long-term risks and costs involved in doing business with Chinese companies. Procurement choices should reflect Serbia's stated policy goal of greater European integration. Alternative vendors which are not beholden to authoritarian regimes offer equipment that is both capable of meeting Serbia's defense need and comparable in quality and cost.”

Serbian **President Aleksandar Vučić** hit back, saying

“Whenever we decide to buy something, somebody has something against it,” and emphasized that the FK-3 system was not on the U.S. sanctions list against China.

The U.S. Embassy's statement gives the impression that Washington has a deep concern about Serbia's future strategic interests and alliances, so much so that it warned Belgrade on its path towards the European Union even though the U.S. has no influence over Brussels in this regard. Of course Washington has no concern for Serbia's interests after it sustained crippling sanctions on the Balkan country, recognizes Kosovo as an independent state, ensured that the Republika Srpska is attached to Bosnia and Herzegovina without option to reunite with Serbia, and led a deadly bombing campaign that destroyed Serbian infrastructure and killed thousands of civilians in 1999.

Washington is afraid of cheaper and better-quality weapons that Serbia can procure from both China and Russia. The Americans are also frustrated that Serbia has not become a state dependent on U.S. patronage despite decades of aggression and pressure. Effectively, Washington is continuing a campaign to limit Serbia's independent and strategic interests. It is recalled that Washington threatened Belgrade with sanctions and indirect threats when Serbia purchased the Russian Pantsir missile system and trained with the S-400 missile defense system.

A NATO official who spoke on condition of anonymity, according to [Defense News](#), said that

“defense procurement is a national decision. Serbia has the right to freely choose its political and security arrangements. NATO and Serbia are close partners and we are committed to strengthening our partnership with Serbia, while fully respecting its policy of neutrality.”

Although both NATO and the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade emphasized that they respect Serbia’s sovereign decision, Washington does not truly respect Serbia’s policy of neutrality, which is why it makes continuous threats of sanctions and indirect warnings that Belgrade is becoming too close to Moscow and Beijing. Serbian political scientist Aleksandar Pavić argues that Washington expects Serbia to buy weapons from countries that have recognized Kosovo’s independence, and that this is Belgrade’s fault as they have purchased weapons from France, and even expressed the possibility of buying some American bombers, despite both countries recognizing Kosovo’s independence.

Although Serbia is attempting to maintain a policy of neutrality, so much so that it even considers buying weapons from the U.S., the reality is that such a policy is impossible. The best Belgrade can hope for is to enact a policy of balancing the Great Powers by strengthening relations with those who support Serbia’s sovereignty and independence, and maintaining friendly posture but distance with those who still support an independent Kosovo. By Serbia buying French military equipment, despite its recognition of an independent Kosovo, and entertaining the idea of buying American bombers, Belgrade is sending mixed messages to its international partners that it can overlook the Kosovo issue. By maintaining such a policy, Belgrade is giving Washington enough leeway to comment and attempt to push Serbia away from China and Russia. Having a stronger policy against those who recognize Kosovo’s independence will give Belgrade a much clearer foreign policy and will force Washington to approach Serbia differently.

None-the-less, by discouraging Belgrade from the idea of buying Chinese weapons, Serbia will likely continue to buy Chinese weapons, and with even stronger intensity. Although Serbia will always prioritize its relations with China and Russia over those who weakened it and recognized Kosovo’s independence, Belgrade should now show this more strongly by ending its policy of neutrality as the West is not neutral towards Serbia.

As the Balkans is heating up again as a place of conflict, Serbia cannot be neutral as much as it attempts to do so. This does not mean that it should have openly hostile relations with the U.S. and other Western States, but because Serbia refuses to sever its deep relations with China and Russia, Serbian interests will always be sidelined when it comes to Western ambitions in the Balkans. Under these conditions, Belgrade should take a stronger position and be unafraid to highlight that their interests do not align with those that the West has for the Balkans.

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