



NATO's forgotten flank?

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday 26th September 2017 the Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research held a study day on the Western Balkans. The event was well attended. What struck the CHACR staff most about the audience, however, was that the vast majority of those of whom it was comprised already possessed a professional interest in the region. Not surprising, because one would expect those with an interest in the region to attend. But surprising, because on almost all of our other previous workshops there have also been a fair proportion of the audience who have been generically interested: they have not been experts, nor has the subject been their own focus, but rather they have been a variety of individuals, often very senior, who were seeking to widen their general understanding, and, importantly, to gain an understanding of why the CHACR thought that the subject matter was one that merited study and attention. But this was the very reason that the study day was held.

It occurred to us at the CHACR that three areas of international affairs were currently getting a fair amount of the defence establishment's attention: first, a resurgent Russia (itself the subject of a previous CHACR study); second, the effects of militant fundamentalist Islam (again, it, and its side-effects, have been the subjects of CHACR studies too); and, finally, third, although seemingly never directly addressed, the side-effects, for those attempting to construct meaningful strategic forecasting and planning, of an increasingly unpredictable and swiftly-position-changing political and leadership dynamic in Western liberal democracies. And those three subjects were being studied often in isolation to each other. The fixation on Russia, for NATO at least, has led to forward basing in the Baltic states and a concentration on NATO's north-eastern and eastern flanks.

If one were to draw a Venn diagram of those three areas of interest, however, one would find that their immediate effects on a European audience do not come together to fall in the Baltics, but in the Balkans. And the Balkans are far from a happy, thriving and stable place. For that reason we felt it highly appropriate that we gave some time to the region. The articles in this issue of *Ares & Athena*, contributed by those who spoke at and attended the study day, are a timely reminder not just to those with an extant interest in the region, but to all defence professionals, that we should not take our eye off this particular ball. For that reason, if for no other, this issue of *Ares & Athena* is more than worth an hour of your time.

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Published by:

Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, Robertson House, Slim Road, Camberley, Surrey GU15 4NP.
Tel: 01276 412708/412660
chacr.org.uk

CHACR business partner:

NSC, Norwich House, Knoll Road, Camberley, Surrey GU15 3SY.
Tel: 01276 678867

CHACR

Director:

Maj Gen (ret'd) Dr Andrew Sharpe

Assistant Director:

Col Martin Todd

Resident Fellows:

Dr Ziya Meral

Dr Louise Tumchewics

Visiting Fellow:

Dr Matthias Strohn

Associate Fellows:

Maj Gen (ret'd) Mungo Melvin

Dr Steve Tatham

Professor Gary Sheffield

Dr Oliver Lewis

Dr Andrew Monaghan

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WESTERN BALKANS: A BACKGROUND

The term ‘Western Balkans’ originated in discussions about the expansion of the European Union into former communist countries. It covered a group of countries that would be offered a specific process of preparation for joining the European Union. Whilst former Soviet satellites and republics (plus Slovenia) were invited to conclude ‘Europe Agreements’ in the first half of the 1990s, the remaining former Yugoslav republics, together with Albania, were involved in a Stabilisation and Association Process from 1999. The focus of their agreements with the EU was on stabilisation first, and association second.

As far as the EU was concerned, this was a ‘second tier’ of countries. Unlike the ‘first tier’ of East European countries subject to ‘Europe Agreements’, the ‘second tier’ of the ‘Western Balkan’ countries had yet to prove their suitability for European integration. While the dominant images of East European candidates in the 1990s were mass rallies, ‘velvet revolutions’ and the peaceful transfer of power, the dominant images of the Western Balkans in the same period were of state collapse, wanton destruction and refugees. This highlights the enduring legacies of state collapse in Albania (1990-92 and 1997) and of the wars and insurgencies in former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 2001.

The ‘Europe Agreement’ countries were all admitted as members between 2004 and 2007. In 2013, Croatia became the first ‘Western Balkan’ country to join the European Union as a member. Accession negotiations were opened with Montenegro in 2012 and with Serbia in 2014. Macedonia (as Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) was granted EU candidate status in 2005, and Albania gained the same status in 2014. Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) entered into force in 2015 and the one with Kosovo in 2016. Unlike any other SAA with Western Balkan countries, the one with Kosovo is an EU-only agreement, which member states do not need to ratify (as five EU member states do not recognise Kosovo’s independence).

On the surface, all seems to be well with the countries of the Western Balkans as prospective EU members. The European Union views all of them as potential members and all are involved in a process leading towards the desired membership. This puts the countries of the Western Balkans in a unique and privileged category compared with other vocal aspirants for EU membership, such as Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia from the European Union’s ‘Eastern Partnership’.

However, countries of the region may have other defects that are not easily detected in official EU documents. These are states that either do not fully control the territory that they officially claim (Serbia, Kosovo), or do not command the loyalty of a substantial number of their citizens (Montenegro, Macedonia), or both (Bosnia and Herzegovina). In other words, these are not fully functioning nation-states. This makes it very hard for the European Union to accept them

as members, as all of the present 28 members had joined the European Community or Union as consolidated nation-states in full control of the territory they claimed (excepting the special case of the Republic of Cyprus, which does not control 40 per cent of the territory it claims; the Federal Republic of Germany considered itself in a similar situation in the period 1957-1972).

Serbia’s path to EU membership would have been the easiest in the Western Balkans, if not for its continuing claim on Kosovo (11 per cent of Serbia’s sovereign territory before 1999). It is the biggest state of the Western Balkans, with the strongest economy and army, and sitting astride a key communications juncture in Europe. It also has the longest tradition of nationhood and statehood in the region, and had dominated the present-day Western Balkans for most of the 20th century. Whilst recognition of Kosovo is not officially a precondition for Serbia’s EU membership, it is hard to imagine a ratification of Serbia’s membership agreement by most EU states without some final status deal on Kosovo.

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Just as Serbia does not control all of the territory that it claims, so it is also the case with Kosovo. The government in Pristina does not control ten per cent of Kosovo’s territory, which is adjacent to Serbia proper and is inhabited and controlled by Kosovo Serbs. All parties representing the Albanian majority insist on the imposition of effective central control over the whole territory of the country, and the Serbian minority would be satisfied by nothing less than internationally guaranteed self-government in association with Serbia proper.

Montenegro’s statehood is handicapped by the clash of two radically different visions of what it means to be a Montenegrin. The official version is that the Montenegrins have always been separate from the Serbs in terms of culture and language, whilst a sizeable minority (varying from 30 to 45 per cent of the population) considers the Montenegrin nation a subdivision of a wider ‘Serb world’ and Montenegrin a local variant of Serbian rather than a separate tongue (as defined in the current constitution of Montenegro).

Macedonian nationhood is similarly challenged, with a vision of contemporary Macedonians as direct descendants of Alexander and Philip being the dominant state ideology in 2006-2017. A sizeable proportion of ethnic Macedonians still subscribe to an older vision of Macedonians as an essentially Slav nation, as was the dominant official discourse from the times of socialist Yugoslavia. To complicate things further, a quarter of Macedonia’s population are ethnic Albanians with a tenuous loyalty to the existing Macedonian state. An Albanian insurgency in 2001 had already forced a change in the definition of the state from ‘a state of the Macedonian people’ to a state of ‘communities’. All ethnic Macedonian parties strive to preserve Macedonia as a unitary state with Macedonian as the sole official language, whilst the declared



Helping hand: A British soldier guides an elderly refugee to medical support at a NATO-run 'tent city' in Brazda, Macedonia during the Kosovo War in 1999. © Courtesy of Soldier, Crown Copyright

goal of all Albanian parties in Macedonia is the gradual transformation of this state into a truly bi-national state of Macedonians and Albanians with respectively two official languages.

Following the Dayton agreements of 1995 that ended the inter-ethnic wars in the country, Bosnia and Herzegovina is officially composed of three 'constituent peoples' (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) and two autonomous entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. The political parties representing the Bosniaks (51 per cent of the population) would like to see a more centralised state curbing or eliminating the autonomy of Republika Srpska, while successive governments of Republika Srpska have periodically threatened to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To sum up, all ethno-nations in the Western Balkans share a passionate attachment to their sovereignty and an inability to impose this sovereignty on all the populations and territories that they claim. As a rule, ethnic groups that enjoy political and demographic advantages in particular states would clamour for their centralisation (Serbs in Serbia, Albanians in Albania and Kosovo, Bosniaks in Bosnia), whilst the very same ethnic groups would be champions of decentralisation wherever they are at a disadvantage (Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo, Albanians in Macedonia and Serbia, Bosniaks in Serbia).

The wars and insurgencies in former Yugoslavia since 1991 graphically illustrate the dangers of picking up 'good guys'. Given half a chance, today's victims of ethnic cleansing would gladly become the ethnic cleansers of tomorrow. Such was the case in Serbian Krajina, first cleansed of Croats in 1991 and then of Serbs in 1995, and in Kosovo in 1999, with Western armies successfully reversing one wave of ethnic cleansing (of Kosovo Albanians) only to facilitate another wave of ethnic cleansing (this time of Kosovo Serbs).

The nations of the region all share a fierce attachment to their sovereignty combined with deep suspicion of ancestral enemies. These are all relatively young nations compared to those of Western Europe, and most have acquired their independence within living memory, often in very unpleasant circumstances.

The fusion of ethnic and religious identification is another important characteristic of the nations of the Western Balkans that affects their perception of 'alien' populations. Thus the 'real' Serb would invariably be Orthodox, at least by origin, and most definitely not Muslim; conversely, a true Bosniak could only be Muslim, even if he happens to be atheist. Religion in such cases is seen as an ethnic marker, rather than as a belief system.

Such intertwining of ethnic and religious identities is a legacy of the Ottoman period with its religiously-defined 'nations' (millets) that were kept together in a hierarchical system, with the Muslims on top. The Balkan nation-states that replaced the Ottoman Empire replicated the same ethno-religious hierarchy, only changing the nation at the top. Thus Serbia's liberation from the Ottomans created a new setting with Orthodox Serbs at the top, with the previous Muslim masters (whether Turkish, Albanian or Serb-speaking) relegated to a 'second class' status. Irrespective of what their Western friends imagine, the new nation-states of Macedonia, Bosnia and Kosovo are seen by their majorities and minorities through the same lenses of ethno-religious domination and subordination.

In such a situation the most important policy would be 'to do no harm' – i.e. to do one's best not to exacerbate the situation by supporting one set of ethno-religious nationalists against another. The position of a scrupulously 'honest broker' may not be the most rewarding one, but is likely to be the least harmful in dealing with accidental majorities and minorities in the newly independent states of the Western Balkans.

CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE AND STABILITY

Global political and security developments, from economic crises to increased migration flows, inevitably reverberate in the Balkans. They interact with regional trends to shape the current and future trajectories of Western Balkan states and the region as a whole. Among the complex interactions between historical legacies, political calculations and strategic foreign policy agendas, three factors emerge as critical for the region: the declining involvement of the EU and the West, the prolonged effects of the global and European economic crisis, and the backsliding of democratic reforms. These three factors drive future developments across the region.

Retreating European involvement

For more than 20 years, the EU and NATO have been key actors in the Balkans – initially in their peace-making and stabilising roles during and after the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and then as major drivers of domestic reform and regional cooperation in the accession process. NATO and EU integration have been the key foreign policy priorities of all Western Balkan states, whose governments have sought to replicate the success of other former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, to join these two regional organisations as part of the broader effort to be recognised as members of the European and Western mainstream.

However, over the past few years EU and NATO involvement with the Western Balkans has substantially declined. With NATO increasingly involved in other regions across the globe, and the EU becoming less confident as a result of Brexit and the internal economic divisions, their retreat has opened space for other global actors to boost

their presence and promote their agendas in the region. This is not only the result of the EU's withdrawal, but also of mutual disillusionment. Governments in the region have become less keen on full EU membership, having seen their EU neighbours, such as Bulgaria and Romania, continuing to struggle to narrow the wealth and governance gap with Western Europe.

As a result of the EU and NATO's weakening appeal, that of other global actors has increased. Most notably, Russian influence has grown over the past few years. While Russia has always been involved in the region, including in the peace negotiations and post-conflict missions, its foreign policy in the Balkans has become increasingly more disruptive of the area's integration within Euro-Atlantic political and security structures. It supported anti-NATO groups in Montenegro, as well as political subjects across the regions that are critical and sceptical of the role of the West in the Balkans.

Turkey's influence in the region has also increased over the past decade, especially in countries with significant Muslim populations, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania. Turkey's investment and historical legacies in the region are increasingly used by its government to increase its say in the Balkans. Other investors, such as China and Gulf states, have also become more prominent in the region, gradually expanding their footprint into more symbolic and cultural projects.

Consequently, the different, and sometimes opposing, influences of foreign powers in the Balkans may lead to increased instability in the short and medium term. Instead of a region united behind a common goal of EU and NATO

European peacekeepers: A Warrior manned by soldiers from The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment pictured during Op Grapple in circa 1993 © Courtesy of Soldier, Crown Copyright





Not only are democratic institutions weak and democratic procedures lacking, but over the past few years several governments have taken measures to roll back democratic reforms. In particular, Serbia since 2012, with Aleksandar Vucic as prime minister and president (since 2017), and Macedonia between 2006 and 2017, under Nikola Gruevski's governments, have seen the most notable move towards authoritarian politics

membership, we may see growing divisions and divergent agendas, weakening regional cooperation and unity.

Economic downturn and its implications

The economies of Western Balkan states are dependent, and to a large extent already integrated, with that of the EU. As a result, the countries in the region suffered a prolonged economic downturn in the aftermath of the European economic crisis in 2008. The timing of the crisis was such that it coincided with a period of renewed regional cooperation and increasing efforts at EU integration among the Western Balkan states. So instead of witnessing an increase in foreign investment, the region suffered a prolonged economic downturn from which some states are still recovering.

These developments diluted the link between economic prosperity and often-painful economic and political reforms. This link fuelled the pre-accession reforms processes in Central and Eastern European states, where the difficult reforms that governments implemented were rewarded with increasing foreign investments and accelerating growth that neutralised some of the adverse effects of post-communist economic restructuring. In the Western Balkans, painful reforms were not rewarded with investment-led growth and prosperity. Rather, Foreign Direct Investment levels remained flat or fell below 2008 and have hardly recovered since.

As a result, these countries continue to lag behind their neighbours and the wealth gap with the EU average remains as wide as a decade ago. Moreover, social tensions have been increasing as a result of prolonged poverty and lack of opportunities for parts of the population across all Western Balkan states. The governments' inability to provide social peace and welfare protections for the most vulnerable, along with a lack of economic opportunities for the young, mean that demographic pressures will continue to increase. The populations continue to contract as a result of persistent emigration to Western Europe, North America, and, increasingly, the Gulf states.

Democratic backsliding

After more than two decades of free elections and the start of a transition towards democratic politics, democracy in the Western Balkans today appears less consolidated than many expected in the 1990s. Not only are democratic institutions weak and democratic procedures lacking, but over the past few years several governments have taken measures to roll back democratic reforms. In particular, Serbia since 2012, with Aleksandar Vucic as prime minister and president (since 2017), and Macedonia between 2006 and 2017, under Nikola Gruevski's governments, have seen the most notable move towards authoritarian politics. With leaders consolidating their power by extending their grip over independent institutions (including the judiciary) and free media, these societies have witnessed a gradual reversal in democratic politics.

While the turn towards illiberal and authoritarian politics is not unique to the Balkans, and similar trends can be traced in Western, Central and Eastern Europe, the potential to lead to greater instability, and even violence, is much greater in the Western Balkans. With legacies of recent conflict and unresolved bilateral and border questions, democratic backsliding could push the region back towards more antagonistic politics, as regional and bilateral relations become increasingly dependent on the mutual relations of pro-authoritarian political leaders.

In conclusion, the three key trends in the region signal a growing potential for regional instability in the Western Balkans. As the post-1989 dominance of the EU and NATO in the region declines, a growing competition between regional and ascending powers opens the Balkans to a variety of agendas and values competing with that of the EU and NATO. This, combined with the prolonged economic difficulties and weakening democratic governance, provides a volatile context against which the long-standing regional issues and unresolved questions will play out in the coming years. While we may not witness a return to full-scale violent conflicts, like those in the 1990s, the resilience of the post-conflict settlements and social contracts will be tested.

EUROPEAN AND NATO ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

To many in the ‘West’, the Western Balkans still provides a major challenge. But there is no consensus as to what this challenge is. Mainly, the challenge is provided by the fact that there are different understandings of the Western Balkans. Essentially, the Western Balkans is a demarcated geographical region; a sub-region of Europe comprising the successor states of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, minus Slovenia and plus Albania. But more importantly, for our purposes, the Western Balkans are also a concept; usually a negative or pejorative concept which has given rise to other concepts such as that of ‘Balkanisation’. There is an image of the Balkans stemming from its role in history, whether this is the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 or the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, which is often defined as being ‘anachronistic’, ‘nationalist’, ‘violent and bloodthirsty’, ‘tribal’, ‘primitive’ and harbouring ‘ancient hatreds’. This is an image cemented in Western consciousness by the siege of Sarajevo, the flattening of Vukovar and Osijek, the crime of Srebrenica and events in Kosovo. This image is one frozen in time, an image of a region that cannot overcome its past and is a constant source of tension and conflict for the broader European theatre. Moreover, it is a region which – historically and in more contemporary times – produces movements and effects that go against all the ideals and ideal types which have defined the West European state system since 1945 and those underpinning the EU project. In short, the Western Balkans provided – and to some continue to provide – a direct challenge to ‘Europe’ and what it is to be European. This is, of course, a stereotype, but one which has been reinforced by its representation in concepts such as the *Clash of Civilisations* (Samuel Huntington) and works such as *Balkan Ghosts* (Robert Kaplan). Apart from its stereotypical qualities, this image is also a distortion in contemporary terms. And the biggest distortion arises from the fact that all current policy – and commentary – towards the Western Balkans is viewed through the latest manifestation of the violent and anachronistic tendency that is the wars of Yugoslavia’s dissolution.

While Western Europe was taking its largest and most significant steps towards European integration through the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the EU, Central and Eastern Europe were throwing off the yoke of communist rule and beginning their transition to democracy and the rule of law. In the midst of this massive and at times euphoric liberal transformation in Europe, we saw the explosion of a European region into war and bloodshed not seen since the Second World War. The consequences of this descent into violence in the midst of a peaceful transformation in the rest of the continent are still felt today in our understanding of the Balkans and the challenge they pose. The stereotype sketched out above is fortified and persists; our relations with the Western Balkans are dominated by the need to ensure stability and security above all else; we aim to contain wars, the human consequences of wars and the idea of war in Europe; and we are risk averse and move with great caution. In the end we see the possibility of Euro-Atlantic integration for the states (and peoples) of the Western Balkans not necessarily as a ‘Return to Europe’, as was the case with the countries of Central

Europe, but as an ‘Introduction to Europe’. Therefore a very specific image of the Balkans persists; it is highly coloured by the most recent iteration of violence in the Balkans – the Wars of Yugoslavia in the 1990s – and it remains in the background as a distorting lens for all contemporary policies. For the most part, the region’s Euro-Atlantic integration is seen as the most attractive policy option and the best future for the region. But the prospects of this integration are not of the highest order not least because, for a number of reasons, the influence of the West is on the wane. This Euro-Atlantic perspective should be examined through its two key institutions, NATO and the EU, and their relationship with and policies towards the region.

NATO

NATO’s involvement in the region is a lengthy and significant one, and is still highly relevant today. We need to keep in mind that the Western Balkans provided NATO with its first out-of-area operation during the Bosnian War and subsequently the alliance, through IFOR and SFOR, was the key security actor guaranteeing the Dayton Accords. Similarly, NATO was the vehicle for the West’s intervention in the Kosovo crisis and was responsible for bringing Serbia to the negotiating table, leading to the Kumanovo Technical Agreement ending the war and the ensuing UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which set out the preconditions for Kosovo’s future status. Apart from its peace-making and stabilising roles in the region, NATO also played a peace-keeping role in the disarmament process after ethnic violence erupted in FYROM in 2001. That magnitude of direct presence and involvement is now reduced to a HQ presence in Sarajevo and the KFOR contingent comprising two battlegroups on a security and capacity-building mandate, operating under Italian command in Kosovo. Nevertheless, NATO’s role is of utmost importance for the region’s security, both in military and political terms: there is a significant ‘over-the-horizon’ readiness under US command from JFC NATO Naples as well as a commitment to extend NATO participation and membership to the states of the region. Albania, Croatia and Montenegro are full NATO members, while all other Western Balkan states bar Kosovo have been inducted into the PfP.

European Union

The EU is by far and away the weightiest actor in the region both in politico-economic terms and in the field of security. Its main instrument of engagement and influence is the accession process. Croatia is the only Western Balkans state to have joined the EU; Montenegro, FYROM and Serbia are in the negotiation phase with no early end in sight. The accession process has been a long and difficult one and has incorporated a pre-accession process known as the Stabilisation and Association Programme which has added an extra stage to a ‘normal’ accession process precisely because of the historical legacies outlined in the opening sections. In short, the EU’s political conditionality has set the bar very high for the countries of the Western Balkans and the targets have not

been readily achieved. As a result, the attractiveness of the EU has also diminished among Western Balkans electorates as the promise of membership, and the economic benefits it might bring, is strung out over time. Nevertheless, the EU remains the biggest economic actor in the region, maintains its political significance and has an important security presence. It has taken over the mantle of security provider in Bosnia under the auspices of CSDP and EUFOR has an important role to play in providing a traditional security guarantee, as well as carrying out capacity-building tasks under the EU's 'comprehensive approach' to security. It is difficult to see beyond the EU in terms of 'Western' influence in the region: it is and will remain the most influential actor despite the weakness of the promise of EU accession, which is its strongest policy tool.

Challenges

There are four main and one subsidiary challenge to security and order in the Western Balkans and for the regional leadership of the two institutions noted above:

● **Backsliding.** There is a perpetual fear of backsliding into the ethnic violence, war and moral abyss of the 1990s. The distortions and images outlined in the opening paragraphs persist, and there is an everlasting concern that persisting regional instabilities and insecurities could break out into physical confrontation dragging in NATO and the EU. Potential flashpoints centre on the future of Bosnia, whose weak showing in the EU accession process is further undermined by poor inter-entity relations and this results, basically, in a non-functioning state. Calls for the secession of Republika Srpska exacerbate this process and heighten tension. The Serbia-Kosovo normalisation process has been a relative success, but it too has stalled and inter-ethnic relations within Kosovo remain tense and a potential source of regional violence. Similarly, the ethnic relationships in the Sandjak area of Serbia are open to manipulation and the situation in FYROM is sensitive (to say the least).

● **Islamic threat?** There is a perceived Islamic threat in and from the region. This has resulted in increasing fears

of the radicalisation of Islamic populations, especially in Bosnia, but elsewhere too, seemingly fuelled by increased involvement by the Gulf states in the region, the general international division surrounding the 'war on ISIS' and the transient migratory flows from Syria and the Middle East who bring with them what are seen as destabilising influences. One must be cautious not to overstate the radicalisation of Islamic populations in the area but in the current international context one can easily understand how this can happen.

● **Russia.** Russia is increasingly seen as a resurgent, opportunist and revisionist influence in the region. Euro-Atlantic integration may be presented as the biggest form of leverage, but the economic and political influence of Russia is not to be underestimated. It is a powerful player in Serbia and Montenegro, and plays an important role in the context of Kosovo through its P5 status in the Security Council. In short, Russia uses insecurity in the Western Balkans and the growing apprehension concerning the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration as an opportunity to promote its own sphere of influence in the Western Balkans and south east Europe in general.

● **Criminality and corruption.** This is not a new phenomenon in the region and it still poses a significant challenge to the rule of law and good governance throughout. The danger here is that much of this criminality, in the form of trafficking of drugs, weapons, money and human beings, is directly linked to corruption within the higher echelons of leadership in a number of the states and, of course, is a trans-national issue. It is a truly destabilising problem and hinders all forms of democratic and economic development in the region.

The subsidiary challenge is provided by the growing interest of China in the region. Its 'One Belt, One Road' initiative – the new 'Silk Road' – has proved to be an attraction to regional governments seeking investments and economic growth. Ultimately, what this does is provide yet another pole of influence, another political factor, in an already muddled context in which the pull of Euro-Atlantic integration becomes increasingly less important, at least in the short-term.



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COMPARING RUSSIAN AND TURKISH INFLUENCES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

One of the most pertinent questions regarding contemporary developments in the Western Balkan states has to do with the role of third countries, like Russia and Turkey. As the Western Balkan region includes mostly post-conflict, small size, less-developed peripheral European states, which are not yet members of the EU, it is often perceived as the soft underbelly of the European continent, vulnerable to external interferences. In the current context of emerging geopolitical challenges and European crises, the Western Balkans have acquired a particular significance as a gateway to Europe, with Russia and Turkey attempting to influence regional developments, through economic ties, energy policy, political relations, media presence, cultural links and identity politics. Far from being their immediate and first priority neighbourhoods, the Western Balkans are a propitious terrain of influence in the region to suit Russian and Turkish domestic and foreign policy goals.

Parallel trajectories

From a first impression, the two Eurasian countries, Russia and Turkey, seem unique in terms of their national histories and cultures, foreign policy orientations and global significance. Yet, both of them, due to historical connections and geographic vicinity with south east Europe, have a tendency to interfere in the Western Balkans' internal affairs, even at the expense of the EU's influence. It is interesting to note that despite the national idiosyncrasies and specificities, Russia and Turkey have followed similar post-1989 trajectories vis-a-vis the Western Balkan region, broadly divided in three distinct phases.

The phase of multilateralism

During the 1990s and the years of the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, Russia and Turkey engaged with the region as part of the dominant multilateral, liberal institutionalist paradigm, backing international initiatives and participating in peacekeeping arrangements.

In Russia, notwithstanding the internal disagreements during the Yugoslav wars between the pro-Serb Russian nationalists and the 'multilateralists', the government chose a pragmatic and cautious policy of cooperation with the transatlantic alliance, seeing Yugoslavia as the mirror image of the disintegrating Soviet Union. From the start, Russia took a position that these conflicts were Yugoslav domestic matters and consequently should be settled within the context of the UN or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe as mediators. Russia kept this official position throughout the wars in Yugoslavia, until the military conflict in Kosovo in June 1999. The latter marked a turning point in Russia's multilateralist approach, annoyed by NATO's military intervention in Kosovo

with which she fundamentally disagreed.

Turkey for its part, sensitised by the wars in Bosnia and the fate of the Muslims in disintegrating Yugoslavia, became a vociferous advocate of multilateral intervention, notwithstanding her own internal differences between the Western-oriented Kemalists and the more assertive neo-Ottoman interventionists. In the face of the Bosniak tragedies, Turkish politicians wavered between unilateral versus multilateral engagement in the conflicts, opting for the latter. During those years, Turkey became a refuge for Bosniak refugees, it used pressure on the West to intervene militarily in order to save the endangered Bosniak communities, it tried some of its mediating diplomatic skills between Bosniaks and Croats, and joined the international forces in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia.

The phase of assertiveness

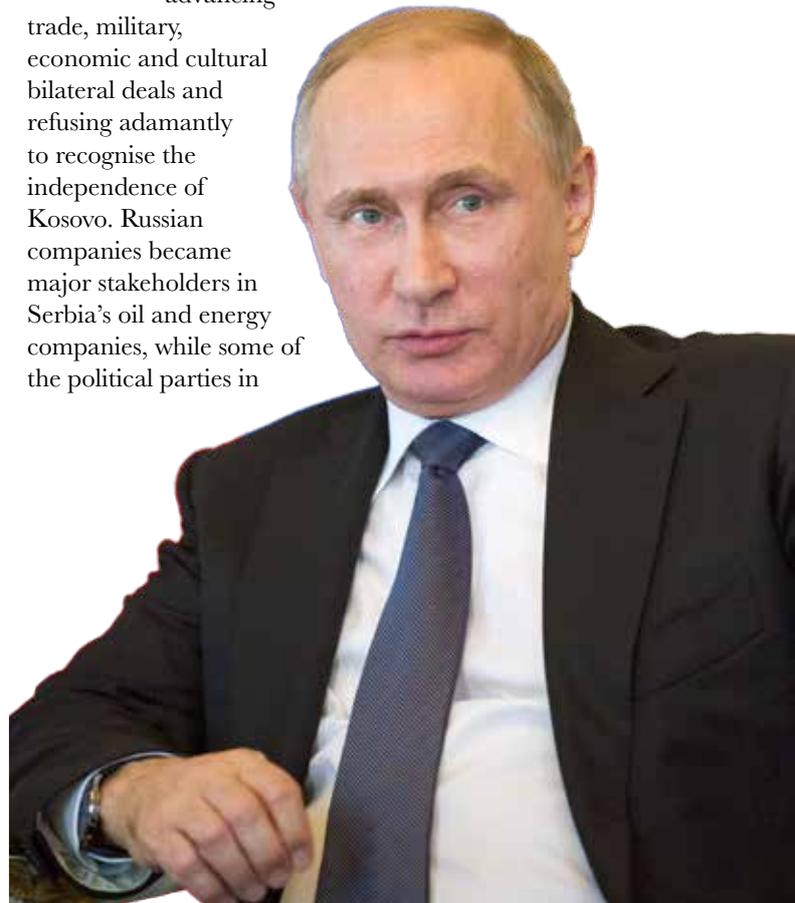
From the mid-2000s both Russia and Turkey underwent an internal dynamic transformation marked by economic prosperity, governmental consolidation and international assertiveness.

Having been highly critical of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, Russia gradually retreated from the policy of multilateralism and chose to build bilateral ties with some of the countries in the Western Balkans. Serbia became the most strategic partner of Russia in the Balkans by advancing

trade, military, economic and cultural bilateral deals and refusing adamantly to recognise the independence of Kosovo. Russian companies became major stakeholders in Serbia's oil and energy companies, while some of the political parties in

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Russia reacted fiercely to Montenegro's membership of NATO, was accused of obstructing the normalisation agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, developed close relations with pro-Russian parties in most Western Balkan states and stirred anti-Western feelings in the region through influential media



Serbia were defined by their allegiance to Orthodox-Christian Russia. A second crucial ally for Russia in the Western Balkans, Montenegro, during the post-2000s became a prime destination for Russian investment in the extractive sector and the tourism industry. The Russian acquisition of real estate was so impressive that public opinion and press often spoke about 'selling off' the Montenegrin land to Russian investors. During the assertive years, Russia's regional approach was largely defined by the South Stream energy route and the establishment of energy dependency of the region on Russia. Under the Putin and Medvedev presidencies, Russia consolidated its position as a major Eurasian energy provider, through its state-owned gas monopoly company, Gazprom, and strategic control of Foreign Direct Investment in the field.

Turkey's assertive phase in the Western Balkans took place with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power and was based on three main pillars. In the diplomatic pillar, Turkey offered mediation and good neighbourly services between Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats, Serbs and Kosovo Albanians or Serbs and Sandzak Muslims, by organising summits and meetings aiming at rapprochement between the opposing ethnic communities. In the economic domain, the rise of the Turkish economy led to increasing investments in infrastructure, a rise in trade relations and Turkish exports in the region and bilateral deals in other economic areas. Finally, in the cultural domain, Turkey exerted its influence through cultural activism and the spread of education. By cooperating with various religious networks and foundations from Turkey, especially the Gülen movement, the Turkish government reached out into community organisations and grassroots politics in the region.

The current phase of competition with the West

The third phase of relations is defined by the most recent dramatic internal and external developments facing Russia and Turkey, including the deterioration of relations with the West, the slowing down of their economies, the establishment of illiberalism and authoritarianism under Putin [pictured left] and Erdoğan [pictured right], respectively, and the increasing geopolitical insecurities in their immediate neighbourhoods. Recently, Russia and Turkey intensified their own bilateral rapprochement based largely on some commonly agreed goals in the Middle East, the introduction of the Turkish (energy) Stream and a commonly-held, anti-Western rhetoric.

Russia's friction with the West was instigated by the Ukraine crisis and NATO's competing presence in the eastern neighbourhood. In the Western Balkans, Russia reacted fiercely to Montenegro's membership of NATO, it cancelled the South Stream project, was accused of obstructing the normalisation agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, developed close relations with pro-Russian parties in most Western Balkan states and stirred anti-Western feelings in the region through influential media. After a period of increasing economic and energy activity in the Western Balkans, Russia's influence was affected by its own economic crisis due to EU sanctions, dropping gas prices and the falling rouble, all of

which have reduced the volume of Western Balkan exports to Russia and diminished the inflow of Russian investment. The end of the South Stream gas pipeline project in 2015, upon Russia's unilateral decision, disappointed the governments of the region and weakened Russia's commitment in the Balkans. The Montenegrin allegations that on the October 16, 2016 election day, the authorities of Montenegro prevented a Kremlin-based coup aided by pro-Russian Serbs, is indicative of a climate of suspicion and conspiracy between not just the two former friends, but also Russia and the West.

Turkey, for its part, has been similarly tormented since 2014 by domestic problems and external insecurities, marked by Erdoğan's rise of presidential autocratic authority, the post-Gezi Park civil discontent, the collapse of the Kurdish peace process and the rise of refugees fleeing the war in Syria. While Turkey continued its policy of engagement with the Western Balkans, the volume of economic engagement has not increased while in the cultural domain, Erdoğan has become obsessed with the "de-Gülenisation" of Turkey's cultural influence. Since the rupture between the AKP and the Gülenists and the latter's purge from the dominant institutions of Turkey, intensified after the coup in July 2016, Erdoğan has been exerting pressure in Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia to close down Gülenist educational institutions in their countries in exchange for more cooperation and economic agreements. In addition, the departure of Ahmet Davutoglu from Turkish politics and Turkey's deteriorating relations with the EU have decreased Turkey's clout in the Western Balkans. Turkey's distancing from the norms of the EU and adoption of an increasingly anti-Western appeal do not resonate well with the mainstream elites of the Western Balkan states, who see their own future within the European Union.

Overall, the two regional powers continue to exercise a certain influence in the Western Balkan region, with often tactical and opportunistic considerations in mind. Both Putin and Erdoğan, despite being controversial figures due to their authoritarianism at home, have a certain appeal with some political circles and some communities in the region. Both leaders, who have recently strengthened their personal and bilateral ties, are taking advantage of the EU's waning normative and strategic influence in the Western Balkans.

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SHOULD THE WESTERN BALKANS MATTER TO POST-BREXIT BRITAIN?

Once the focus of international media attention, the Western Balkans has largely disappeared from public consciousness over the past decade. The economic crises in Europe, conflicts in the Middle East, renewed tensions with Russia, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have seen the region recede into the media background. However, the Western Balkans remains a source of concern. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, political and economic stagnation are coupled with separatist threats from Republika Srpska. Kosovo's path to international acceptance is being hindered by a dysfunctional political system and a stalled dialogue process with Belgrade. More widely, the region remains underdeveloped economically and prone to corruption, organised crime, populist nationalism and religious extremism.

In the face of these pressures, the European Union remains the single most important stabilising influence in the region. It is no exaggeration to say that the prospect of EU membership has done more than anything else to encourage the countries of the Western Balkans to address many of the domestic problems they face and encourage them to engage with one another in a more constructive manner. In this context, the United Kingdom has been a key actor. As a leading champion of enlargement, Britain has had real influence in the Western Balkans. However, as Britain prepares to leave the European Union, this influence is waning. With limited diplomatic resources, the countries of the Western Balkans must focus their attention on the EU states that can best further their membership ambitions. As one regional diplomat noted to the author, London is no longer a key capital for his country's government. This raises the question of whether the United

Kingdom can continue to exert influence in the Western Balkans after Brexit.

Limited British ties to the Western Balkans

The problem is that, without EU membership, there are few links between Britain and the region. Contrary to widespread belief, the number of people living in Britain who were born in the Western Balkans is rather small. According to the 2011 census, there were fewer than 75,000. This includes 28,000 from Kosovo, 13,000 from Albania, 8,000 from Bosnia and 8,000 from Serbia and Montenegro (although the figures may be considerably higher than this if one factors in illegal immigration). To put this in perspective, there are 694,000 from India, 579,000 from Poland, 407,000 from Ireland, 274,000 from Germany and 191,000 from South Africa. There are even 177,000 from the United States. This number also pales into insignificance when compared with the numbers of people born in the Balkans living elsewhere in the EU. For example, there are well over a million living in Germany.

Trade between the United Kingdom and the six countries of the Western Balkans is negligible. No Western Balkan country features in Britain's top 50 export destinations or sources of imports. Data from the Office for National Statistics reveal just how bad the picture is. In 2015, Albania was 154th for exports and 161st for imports; Bosnia was 130th for exports and 124th for imports; Kosovo 179th for exports and 177th for imports; Macedonia was 57th for exports and 128th for imports; Montenegro was 182nd for imports and 157th for exports; and Serbia was 100th for exports and 88th for imports (*Who Does the UK Trade With?*, ONS Digital, 21 February 2017). Speaking to ambassadors from the region in London, they have repeatedly said just how hard they have found it to build economic links between Britain and the Western Balkans. British companies have been much more focused on wealthier European markets, or have wanted to pursue trade with Commonwealth countries, where there are often established links. Few want to explore opportunities in the Balkans, especially as the entire population of the six countries is less than 20 million people. In the Brexit context, it is hard to see why the Department for International Trade would want to expend energy on such a fractured, small and relatively poor region.

The soft power influence of Britain is also very limited. Contrary to the view that Britain would have been 'flooded' by new arrivals from the region as the countries join the EU, the truth is that we have never been a significant target for those wishing to emigrate from the Balkans. Although somewhat out-dated, a Gallup Balkan Monitor opinion poll taken in 2009 showed that the United Kingdom was not even in the top ten destinations. Germany, the United States, Switzerland, Italy, Australia, France, Austria, Greece and Sweden all came ahead of Britain as a preferred place to settle. Again, this can be explained by the fact that there is not a large Balkan community in Britain. Meanwhile, few people from the region even want to visit the UK for holidays. Unlike the rest of the EU, which offers 90-day visa free travel for most



Britain's membership of the UN Security Council is a blunt tool. It only works when used in conjunction with the US and France. It is hard to envisage any circumstances when it would vote against them on a Balkans issue



For the insular supporters of leaving the European Union, who see no reason for Britain to continue being the world's policeman, the argument is that taking back control of our borders means that Britain will be better able to prevent organised crime and religious extremism from being felt on these shores without having to be directly engaged with the region

of the Western Balkans, obtaining a visa for the UK is time-consuming and expensive. Most people from the region avoid coming to Britain if they can help it.

Meanwhile, the loss of EU membership cannot be replaced by the other main sources of British significance on the world stage. For example, the prospect of joining NATO, while not insignificant, is not the same prize for the countries of the region as joining the EU, nor is it in any way as onerous or politicised. As NATO seeks to take in all the countries of the region, no one feels the need to press their case in London. More to the point, Serbia, in many ways the key country of the region from a security perspective, has repeatedly stated that it has no wish to join the organisation. Likewise, Britain's membership of the UN Security Council is a blunt tool. It only works when used in conjunction with the US and France. It is hard to envisage any circumstances when it would vote against them on a Balkans issue. In other ways, it can even do more harm than good. Take, for example, the attempt in 2015 to pass a Security Council resolution on genocide that made repeated reference to Srebrenica. This resulted in considerable anger in Serbia, which in turn led to a Russian veto. This has merely further indebted Belgrade to Moscow.

Is the Western Balkans Britain's problem?

Given the absence of strong ties to the Balkans, in many ways the real danger is that British policy makers may decide that it is not worth trying to maintain a prominent role in the region after Brexit. While many long-term observers of the region in Britain may believe that the case for continuing British involvement is unassailable, others may take a different view.

All things considered, the risks of a return to conflict seem small. Meanwhile, there are far larger conflicts currently in progress. Also, the role of Russia appears overstated. It is a trouble-maker, but not a viable hegemon. And while growing extremism and organised crime should concern Britain, there will be those that will argue that these are primarily problems for the European Union. Britain can certainly play a supporting role in efforts to tackle these problems, as and when needed. However, as Britain prepares to leave the EU, does the UK need to be at the forefront of the efforts to manage these issues?

Crucially, the question of continued involvement will resonate with both the main Brexit camps. For the insular supporters of leaving the EU, who see no reason for Britain to continue being the world's policeman, the argument is that taking back control of our borders means that Britain will be better able to prevent organised crime and religious extremism from being felt on these shores without having to be directly engaged with the region. Meanwhile, paradoxically, a 'Global Britain' could also see the UK take a more distant role in the Western Balkans. Faced with its own limited diplomatic resources, and the need to strengthen our wider trading relationships, the case could be made that the UK should focus its efforts on where it can achieve the most significant results, such as the United States and China, and where it has strong and well-established ties, such as the Commonwealth.

In the context of Brexit, the case for a continuing British commitment to the Western Balkans is far from clear, especially when Britain does not have particularly deep links to the region and such engagement may require time, effort and money that could be more obviously focused elsewhere.

DEFENCE ENGAGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

In overall terms, security and stability in the Western Balkans region is being maintained, with some direct threats to UK interests. Positively, Montenegro's NATO accession, Macedonia's reformist government and Serbia's EU Chapter openings suggest reasons for optimism, even if hard work requiring engagement and resource remains. The migration issue is being effectively managed, though sometimes malign influence counter to our interests provides unwanted background noise in the region. The UK MoD is held in high regard and is the provider of choice at the intellectual (education and training) end of the spectrum, and in terms of our tactical training capabilities built up over long years of operational experience. The key will be to maintain this engagement and enhance it through additional understanding of resourcing (in progress) and policy engagement in the face of competing priorities for UK MoD and the wider Government.

Taking a regional view, it is clear that the UK enjoys preferred provider status in niche, influential and non-kinetic defence engagement interventions, such as military education and training. We are developing a solid reputation for our regional approach to training with specific emphasis upon activities such as Royal College of Defence Studies alumni events, Defence Academy products including Strategic Leadership Training and Managing Defence courses, Building Integrity courses, BMATT provision, English Language Training (ELT) and the successful, if nascent, application of a regional support model through 160 Brigade in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia.

UK policy objectives

The Western Balkans strategy objectives include: avoiding the return of instability requiring costly UK intervention; reducing threats to UK posed by inter-ethnic conflict, organised crime and migration; increasing resilience to malign influence and extremism; supporting stability and security in the region through influence, access, insight and early warning; assisting other UK Ministries in tackling threats to the UK including CT/extremism, migration, organised crime weapon/ammunition proliferation; and the maintenance of well-focused interventions supported by high-impact activities to maintain UK engagement at realistic and manageable resource levels.

Key regional challenges

- Creating conditions for effective policy engagement on a long-term investment basis. Utilising all available hooks including NATO and the EU.
- **Analysis to underpin how increased attention through footprint and/or engagement now will prevent more significant investment downstream.**
- Maintaining visibility of the Balkans' agenda whilst the UK wrestles with other, sometimes higher priority, security challenges.
- **Migration: Working cross-Government to understand second order issues such as movement**

of dangerous individuals and arms trafficking as well as the effectiveness of joint Balkan military/police border management.

- Understand and potentially counter malign influence in the region through the provision of alternative narrative.
- **Balancing state aspirations with the need to steer regional influence positively from a UK perspective.**

Mapping relations in the Western Balkans:

UK and Serbia

What we are looking for: We want to develop a mutually beneficial military-to-military relationship which rebuilds the trust and engagement our forces once enjoyed. We want Serbia to continue to export and expand security through its contributions to UN and EU Peace Keeping Operations (PKOs), whilst following a balanced (non-aligned) Serbian internal and external security policy, according to EU norms.

What they are looking for: Serbia wants intellectual military expertise through education, doctrine and military training, in support of its ongoing modernisation programme as well as NATO Individual Partnership Action Plan and eventual EU Common Security and Defence Policy progress. It seeks recognition (and some material support) for its effective migrant handling policies.

UK and Montenegro

What we are looking for: We want the continued export of security through UN and EU PKOs, and a friendly NATO ally in the southern Adriatic, providing maritime intelligence and basing capabilities.

What they are looking for: Montenegro seeks intellectual and material support post-NATO membership, as well as assistance in the development of its nascent military intelligence branch.

UK and Albania

What we are looking for: We want access to excellent and economically attractive training facilities and opportunities through mil/mil joint training, as well as a credible and capable NATO member with an air force that is interoperable and capable of burden sharing.

What they are looking for: Albania wants support to its credibility as a NATO member with an emphasis upon its infantry and naval capacity building and development of its Biza training area, as well as specific support to its Very High Readiness Joint Task Force contributions.

UK and Macedonia

What we are looking for: We want armed forces ready to take up NATO membership and to be interoperable to enable



Sought-after education: Anes Halilovic (Armed Forces Bosnia in Herzegovina) and Lt Prance (Army of the Republic of Macedonia) are recent graduates of The Royal Air Force College Cranwell.

burden sharing in peacekeeping and international operations.

What they are looking for: Macedonia wants capacity building assistance, especially through joint training, help in professional development – especially English language and leadership training – and some intelligence and cyber support.

UK and Kosovo

What we are looking for: A safe and secure Kosovo, and to maintain close situational awareness but at a sustainable resource level – through a responsible and credible security force that benefits both the state and the region.

What they are looking for: Kosovo seeks UK support to create its armed forces (if/when politically agreed), continued support to assist its path to professionalisation and support for NATO membership.

UK and Bosnia in Herzegovina

What we are looking for: Above and beyond the obvious desire for stability and reconciliation, the UK seeks a strengthening of capacities and capabilities, increased CT, intelligence and security and cooperation, and an outline of a path to eventual NATO membership.

What they are looking for: Bosnia in Herzegovina wants activation of its NATO Membership Action Plan process, senior UK, NATO and EU leadership engagement and a more forward leaning NATO. Maintaining the policy debate on EUFOR in Bosnia in Herzegovina might also be useful.

The UK's regional priorities and interventions

The Western Balkans is important to the UK. Our long history of engagement gives us both reputation and influence. The key to a successful strategy in the region is the understanding of that region. This will enable our setting of the conditions for policy engagement with the states both regionally and bilaterally. It is our priority to generate a forward leaning statement of regional intent and then resource it. Understanding and countering malign influence in the region is one specific manifestation of this approach. Membership of multinational institutions (NATO and EU) offers us the greatest leverage opportunities. Our assistance in the development of capacity and capability,

including engaging on security sector reform, MoD and armed forces reform, generates interoperability and standardisation. This allows countries to take a greater role in supporting international military and policing missions, and directly supports NATO and EU pathways.

Bilaterally, there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to the Balkans except in some specific cases. In terms of better understanding the region, additional UK MoD resourcing in Kosovo, Bosnia in Herzegovina, Albania and Serbia has been completed. We enjoy a degree of high-level engagement, though of course higher priority regions and situations must also be satisfied. As is being demonstrated in Serbia through recent Army Commander-level staff talks, doors can be prized ajar through senior intervention. Policy engagement will require Ministerial attention and investment now may reveal significant downstream benefits.

At the tactical/operational level, we should try to maintain our, in many ways, leading position in the region in respect of military education and training through continued (or increased) resourcing of places at academic institutions, BMATT support and Defence Academy engagement. We can additionally seek out regional opportunities to expand UK access and influence, through regional high-level visits, contributions to regional military activity such as the Balkan Medical Task Force, ELT support (which remains the most obvious and simple regional quick win), crisis management training (e.g. flooding response) on a regional basis, as well as promoting regional cooperation through courses in the UK and the region, open to all. We should seek to maximize our assigned Adaptive Brigade (160 Brigade) resources and ensure they are fully integrated into our planning and delivery mechanisms.

Whilst we should try to resource military to military engagement in support of all regional EU/NATO aspirant states, we might also consider increased opportunities for UK collective military training within the region and, notably, seek to place UK Servicemen and women on courses provided in Western Balkan nations where there is expertise such as the Serbian Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Training Centre, the PKO Centre in Belgrade and the Officer Training Centre in Sarajevo, as well as maximising the use of – indeed assisting in the development of – excellent collective training areas, most notably in Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia in Herzegovina.



CHACR MISSION STATEMENT

To conduct and sponsor research and analysis into the enduring nature and changing character of conflict on land and to be the active hub for scholarship and debate within the Army in order to develop and sustain the Army's conceptual component of fighting power.