

# RUSSIAN CHALLENGES TO NATO'S SOUTHERN FLANK

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While NATO's northern and eastern flanks usually receive the bulk of strategic attention, rather less tends to be said about the southern flank. Although the threats to the Baltics and conflict in Ukraine may seem more readily understandable from a traditional military perspective, the challenges to the south are, in their own way, just as formidable. The geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Balkans are changing rapidly and in highly unpredictable ways. Russia is actively seeking to extend its influence in these areas and is using a wide variety of methods to achieve its goals, including soft power and hybrid warfare. Alongside its focus on Northeast and Central Europe, NATO needs to consider how to respond to the changing regional landscape in Southeast Europe.

## Eastern Mediterranean

The Eastern Mediterranean is proving to be a particularly fascinating region for long-standing observers. Many of the old assumptions about allegiances and alliances are being tested in novel ways. By far the most important actor is Turkey. In recent years, there has been considerable discussion about the direction that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is leading the country. EU membership talks are now on hold over concern about his increasingly autocratic ways. Meanwhile, many in NATO increasingly question the country's commitment to the alliance. There have been strong differences of opinion between Turkey and its partners over Syria, not least of all over the recent military invasion of Kurdish held areas. It is no secret that there is a profound sense of uncertainty in the alliance about Turkey's direction.



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However, it is Turkey's relationship with Russia that is causing the most alarm. Having come perilously close to conflict in 2015, when a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian SU-24 jet over the Turkish-Syrian border, the two countries have since mended fences and established what looks to be, at least on the surface, a close relationship. Although many are sceptical about the true depth of these ties – does Vladimir Putin either truly forgive or forget? – there is no doubt that Erdogan admires the Russian president. For his part, Putin clearly sees an ideal opportunity to weaken NATO. Ankara's decision to purchase Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile systems has caused dismay amongst Turkey's NATO partners.

And yet, in other ways, Russian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean appears to be waning. There was a time when Greece and Cyprus – fellow Orthodox Christian nations – were considered to be reliable sympathisers; even to the point that both were considered by many to be Moscow's Trojan horses in NATO and the EU. This is no longer the case. Despite coming to power as a radical leftist, the Greek government led by Alexander Tsipras (2015-2019) proved to be far more pro-American than anyone would have imagined. These ties have been further strengthened with the arrival into power of a new centre-right administration under Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Visiting Athens in October 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hailed a 'new era' in relations with Greece. This was underscored by further enhancements to a bilateral military agreement that will see US naval facilities in the country upgraded.

Meanwhile, Greece's relations with Moscow have come under unprecedented strain – not least because of Russian mishandling. The most significant incident came in the summer of 2018 with the signifying of the historic

Prespa Agreement, which brought an end to the so-called Macedonia name issue. Fearful that the deal would open the way for North Macedonia to join NATO, Russia sought to whip up opposition to the agreement in Greece. In response, Athens expelled two Russian diplomats. This was an unprecedented development in a country long felt to be particularly close to Moscow.

Even in Cyprus, where the dominant Greek Cypriot community has long looked to Russia to defend their interests against perceived British and American support for Turkey, there are signs that Moscow's influence is declining. This is primarily driven by the discovery of natural gas off the island's coast. As well as trying to cultivate US support for drilling activity in the face of strong opposition from Turkey, Nicosia has sought to establish a strong relationship with Israel, which is also sitting on vast offshore energy reserves. The bonds of friendship between Israel and Turkey in the 1990s, have seemingly now given way to a burgeoning Israeli-Hellenic axis. Meanwhile, the growing ties between Russia and Turkey are also a source of concern for the Cypriot Government. While Nicosia does not appear ready to wholly abandon its close historic ties with Moscow, it is nevertheless telling that, as in Greece, the US is increasingly seen by policy makers as the more valuable strategic ally.

### Western Balkans

Just as important geostrategic changes are taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Western Balkans are again attracting attention. Following the end of the wars in the 1990s, the region drifted off the radar of most policy makers as Afghanistan and the Middle East came to the fore. However, in recent years, interest has grown again. In part, this is due to lingering concerns about the possibility of renewed fighting in the region. Although this risk should not be overstated, the potential for clashes in Kosovo or violent incidents in Bosnia remains.

In the meantime, other security challenges have come to the fore. Organised criminal networks, including arms smuggling, pose a very real threat. Likewise, radicalism, be



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it from Islamist movements or extreme nationalists, is also a source of concern.

Once again, there is also a sense that Russia sees an ideal opportunity to create mischief in the region. It is no secret that Moscow has been ramping up its propaganda efforts in the region. It also seems to have been active in sowing discord in other, more troubling ways. Russia stands accused of fomenting a coup attempt in Montenegro in October 2016. However, Putin's room for manoeuvre in the region is limited. NATO has established a good reach into the Western Balkans over the past two decades. In 2004, Slovenia became the first republic of Former Yugoslavia to join the organisation. This was followed by Croatia, and Albania, in 2009. More recently, Montenegro joined NATO in 2017. Looking ahead, and as noted above, we can expect North Macedonia to become the 30th member of NATO by the end of this year. However, from there the picture becomes more difficult. Three key territories remain outside the organisation: Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia.



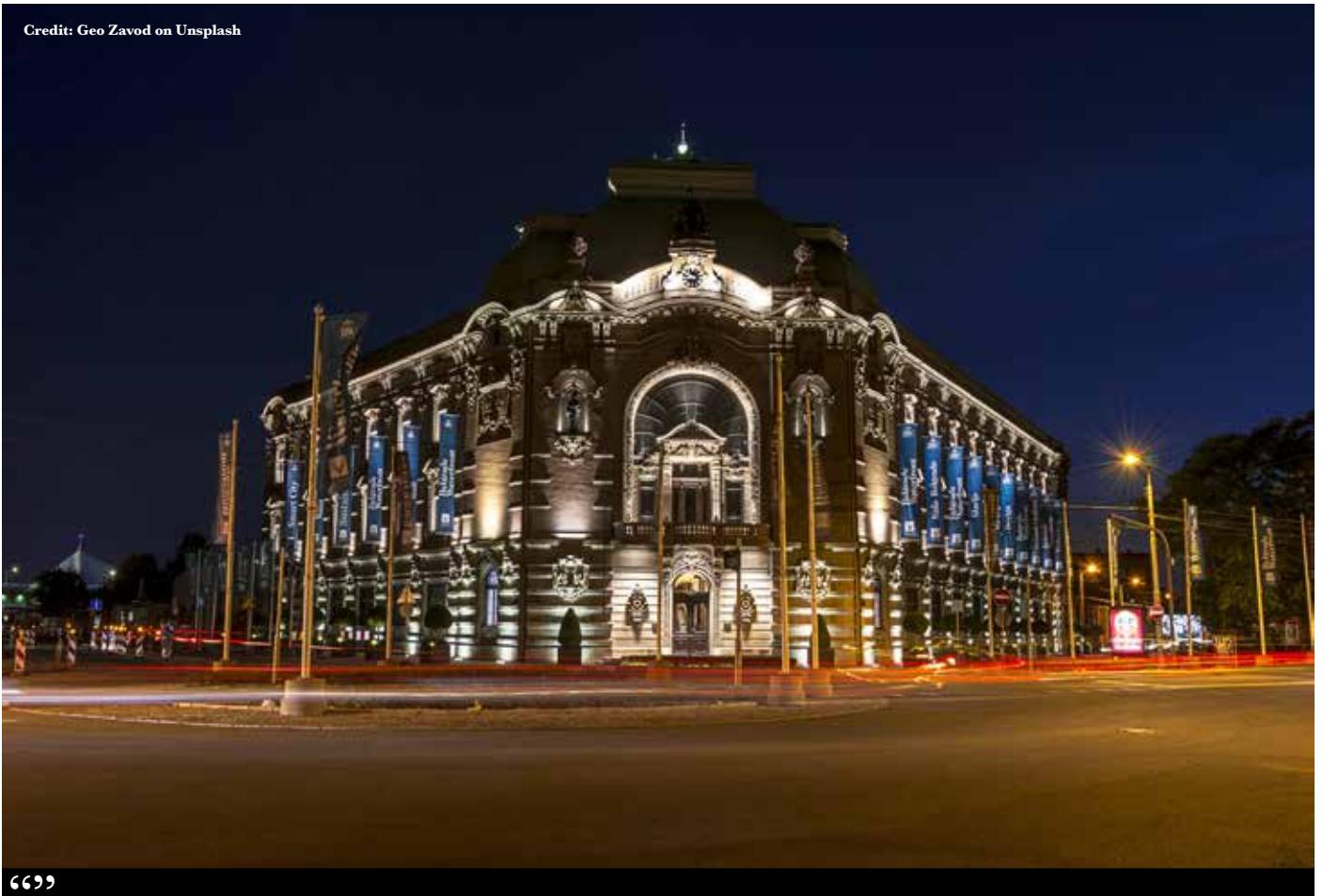
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Above and right, British personnel and assets on NATO business in Bosnia during 1996



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Alongside Cyprus, Kosovo is the second European country that is not a member of PFP. This is perhaps surprising. In many ways, it is a natural fit for the organisation. The country is extremely pro-Western and already hosts a major NATO presence. However, its path to membership is blocked as it is not recognised by four NATO members – Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. Until there is a final agreement on its independence, it seems destined to remain outside the organisation. Likewise, Bosnia seems to have little prospect of NATO membership any time soon. In this case, accession is blocked by the deep political divisions in the country and the fierce opposition to membership within the Bosnian Serb leadership.

This brings us to Serbia. This is in many ways the key piece of the puzzle. If Serbia can be brought on board, then Kosovo and Bosnia will fall into place. Key to this is reaching a final settlement over Kosovo. As long as Serbia needs Russia's support in the Security Council, Moscow will have leverage over Belgrade. It is perhaps not surprising that the US and EU are both determined to try to resolve the issue in the next year. Beyond this, an ideal outcome would also see Serbia join NATO. At present, this seems wholly unrealistic. Opinion polls show that the public is wholly against the idea. So too is the government, in public. In private, it seems that many policy makers do not see it as such a far-fetched ambition. There is already extensive military cooperation with NATO; far more than with Russia. Many in Serbia can see the benefits of membership, especially if the Kosovo issue has been resolved.

## Conclusion

While there is a natural temptation for many policy makers and officials to focus on the Baltics and Ukraine as the key risks and strategic challenges to NATO, it is clear that Russia's strategy extends well beyond the North East and Central Europe. South East Europe – broadly defined to include the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans – also represents a key target for Moscow. In particular, the entire Russian strategy in the region now rests on two key countries: Turkey and Serbia.

These must be the key goals for Western diplomacy if it is to keep Moscow in check. More needs to be done to break the emerging strategic relationship between Putin and Erdogan. At the same time, a concerted effort needs to be made to settle Kosovo and win over Belgrade. Without these two countries on board, Russia will continue to pose a challenge on NATO's southern flank.

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