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STRATEGIC CURBING OF SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY DIVERSIFICATION: WEDGING, DE-HEDGING, CORNERING, CO-OPTING AND NEGATIVE FRAMING

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Abstract: While being quasi-surrounded by NATO countries and pursuing European Union membership talks, the Republic of Serbia is leading an 'independent foreign policy', based on its declared military neutrality and its multi-vector diplomacy, requiring delicate Eastward hedging. Such strategy is due to the country's strategic narrative and the evolving geopolitical environment marked by multipolarization, defined by the clash of global powers over its territorial integrity, economic diversification and diplomatic manoeuvrability. Serbia's non-alignment with the political West regarding the imposition of sanctions against the Russian Federation, and its building of a 'China-Serbia Community with a Shared Future in the New Era' with Beijing, are perceived by the political West as a 'blurry' of Serbia's strategic orientation. For Brussels and Washington, this orientation should be clearly Westward, particularly in the light of direct confrontation with Moscow and intense competition with Beijing. Thus, Western capitals and institutions have pursued a series of policies aimed at curbing Serbia's foreign policy diversification. This paper explores the range of these policies - from negative framing and de-hedging, to co-opting, wedging and cornering. It concludes that the Western statecraft repertoires aimed at shaping the Balkans environment have limits due to Serbia's own strategic interests, and the great power competition in the region.

Keywords: Serbia, foreign policy, hedging, China, EU, Russia, USA

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SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY POSTURING: HEDGING WHILE MULTI-VECTORING**

While formally in membership talks with the European Union since 2014, the Republic of Serbia insists it is leading an 'independent foreign policy', based on its military neutrality, the need to preserve its territorial integrity and Serb national interests in the Balkans, and to diversify its economic relations, while adapting its proclaimed multi-vector policy (EU/US/Russia/China/Global South) to the rising multipolarization.

Such positioning is clearly unique in a European environment marked by Manichean polarization. An actor seeking alternatives and diversification can easily be considered an outlier, a depiction Serbia already had to go through in Western capitals during the 1990s Yugoslav conflicts.

Yet, the 1999 NATO bombings and the 2008 EU-US masterminding of 'Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence', in violent breach of international law, play an important role in the strategic posturing of the country, reducing the chances of West-bound bandwagoning. Indeed, the circumstances surrounding the prospect of 'Kosovo's UDI' have included the proclamation of Serbia's military neutrality in 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin's threat of a veto of 'Kosovo's independence' through the UN Security Council system, and Beijing's careful monitoring of Western mechanisms behind potential 'UDI-bound processes' in Priština and Taipei.

On the other side, the EU's own 'enlargement fatigue, economic and financial crises, and nonchalance towards multipolarization, the US relative disengagement from and Russia's relative comeback to the Balkans, as well as China's new global and regional development initiatives, further complicated the geopolitical context.

Indeed, since 2014, Belgrade is negotiating EU membership in a sluggish if not stalled process. The struggle to preserve territorial integrity regarding Kosovo has furthermore implied a strong diplomatic leaning in the UN Security Council on the People's Republic of China and the Russian

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Federation, including decisions not to harmonize with EU restrictive measures against the two. In the process, Serbia has strengthened its energy cooperation with Russia, elevated the formal status of its bilateral relations with China to the highest level in Europe, and pursued an active diplomatic policy towards the Global South vying for support regarding Kosovo and economic diversification. Serbia's EU negotiations started at the time when the EU was still reeling from the shock of the economic crisis, unable if not unwilling to assist in Serbia's economic development recovery. This role was immediately filled by two countries of the Global South – China through its Belt and Road Initiative, which helped Serbia build transportation infrastructure and save its key mining and metal processing companies, and the United Arab Emirates through investments and credit lines which helped Belgrade stabilize its troubled finances. Russia's support for Serbia in the UN Security Council went beyond the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. Moscow particularly supported Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including against an attempt by the United Kingdom in 2015 to pass a UN Security Council resolution on 'Srebrenica genocide' – vetoed by Russia – which would have had considerable implications for Belgrade.

The depiction of Serbia's foreign policy as based on 'four pillars' – white still relevant – is thus in need of adjustment.

The concept of 'hedging' has been applied recently to Serbia's foreign policy. The Cold war-era concept of 'balancing' (allying with others against the prevailing threat) – while often used in public discourse – cannot fully apply to Serbia's peculiar strategic posturing, same as the concept of 'bandwagoning' (allying with a potentially threatening power) (Walt, 1987). Serbia's military neutrality, proclaimed in 2007 in the context of the threat of 'Kosovo's UDI', suggests 'no evidence is found to indicate the adoption of pure forms of balancing or bandwagoning in Serbian behaviour' (Nikolić, 2024).

Thus, a rising depiction of 'hedging' in Serbia's foreign policy (Ejdus, 2023; Dettmer, 2023; Nikolić, 2024; Mitić, 2024a), a concept transferred from the contexts of Southeast Asia (Goh, 2005; Gerstl, 2022; Kim, 2023), and the Middle East (Salman and Geeraerts, 2015; El-Dessouki and Mansour, 2020; Fulton, 2020). Mitić and Nikolić both identify the sources of Serbia's hedging in the aftermath of 'Kosovo's UDI' and the

simultaneous rise of multipolarization. Serbia's hedging strategy has several underpinnings, grounded mostly in its slow, if not stalled membership talks with the European Union. Primarily, these are due to Chapter 23 (respect of rule of law – a major hurdle for all candidate states), Chapter 31 (alignment with EU foreign policy) and Chapter 35 ('normalization of relations' with the Kosovo Albanian leadership in Priština), in addition to chronic challenges of EU 'enlargement fatigue' and lack of political will (Mitić, 2024b). These hurdles have prompted Serbia's 'non-Western' turn, which has manifested itself in the struggle for the support on Kosovo at the UNSC (China and Russia) and at the General Assembly and UN bodies such as Interpol and UNESCO (Global South). In addition, Serbia has increased military-technical cooperation with Russia and China (imports) and the Global South (exports), as well as cooperation in energy security (Russian gas), mining and infrastructure (China's investments and loans) and overall trade diversification. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, particularly since 2022, Serbia's hedging has turned more prominently in China's direction.

Understandably, the concept of 'hedging' has not been employed by Serbia officials, who prefer references to a 'multi-vector' policy of maximizing national interests through diversified partnerships and dexterity in navigating a complex geopolitical environment (Azermedia, 2025), as exemplified by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, South Africa and Brazil.

While Serbia – as a legal successor state to the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia – takes pride in Belgrade's leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the Cold War, and has a pro-active policy towards NAM even today (due to the fight over the de-recognition of 'Kosovo's UDI' and economic diversification), its foreign policy today cannot be labelled as 'non-aligned'. Then again, even India, a traditional leader in the NAM, has shifted from 'non-alignment' towards 'multi-alignment', as a 'series of parallel relationships that strengthen multilateral partnerships and seek a common approach among the grouping towards security, economic equity and the elimination of existential dangers like terrorism' (Drishtiias, 2022) Yet, India has done so through formal memberships in BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC, with Russia, Iran and

Central Asia) and QUAD (with the US, Japan and Australia), while Serbia remains outside NATO, the CSTO and (for now) the EU or BRICS – although it is participating in lower-tier arrangements with each.

On the other side, Mihaylov takes a more holistic approach, and delves into Yugoslavia's NAM legacy, to consider that Serbia is pursuing a 'third way' geopolitical positioning of searching for benefits from geopolitical poles while remaining outside of them, which includes a number of features, including military neutrality, political multi-vectorism, strategic trade diversification and 'external projection of domestic cultural-historical sentiments' (Mihaylov, 2024). Indeed, while being a small power, Serbia is a key geopolitical actor in the Balkans, with 'external projection' capacities in the entire region, well beyond its recognized borders.

Yet, no matter how defined, Serbia's foreign policy posturing has not been welcomed by Western powers in the context of multipolarization and heightened tensions with Russia and China. Particularly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, and rising EU/NATO militarization in Europe, they are employing various sets of statecraft repertoires to shape Serbia's strategic environment and curb its foreign policy alternatives. We will look at several tools which have been employed in pursuit of such objectives.

SHAPING TO CURB

Throughout history, each global power seeks to 'shape the international system in accordance with its own values' (Kissinger, 1994, p. 17). Wolfley argues that, nowadays, 'shaping relies primarily on attraction, legitimacy, persuasion, and positive incentives and less on uses or threats of force' (Wolfley, 2021). Thus, shaping requires the use of persuasion by words and deeds (Mitić, 2024a). In terms of words, shaping requires 'geopolitical storylines' as sets of arguments which provide 'a relatively coherent sense-making narrative for a foreign policy challenge' (O'Tuathail, 2002, p. 619). To boost these storylines, political actors apply 'frames' to provoke reactions of the public on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. As far as deeds are concerned, in international politics, states practice 'statecraft' – 'organised actions governments take to change the external environment in general or the policies and actions of other states in particular to achieve the objectives set by policymakers'

(Holsti, 1976, p. 293). States use four types of statecraft instruments – military, political, diplomatic and cultural – to 'influence others in the international system – to make their friends and enemies behave in ways that they would have otherwise not' (Goddard, MacDonald & Nexon, 2019, p. 306). Furthermore, states use 'sets of repertoires' as 'more limited toolkits in use, whether by particular states, in relations among specific states, or in specific settings' (Goddard, MacDonald & Nexon, 2019, p. 310). These sets of statecraft repertoires align with what O'Tuathail calls 'geopolitical scripts' – a 'tacit set of rules for how foreign policy actors are to perform in certain speech situations, and how they are to yet articulate responses to policy challenges and problems' (O'Tuathail, 2002, p. 619). These scripts need to be flexible enough to harmonise, depending on the situation, context or development, with the set of statecraft repertoire a state can employ. Furthermore, they must connect the words and the deeds, and 'close the say-do gap' as one of the critical elements of successful strategic communication (Mitić, 2018, p. 143).

Small states are particularly vulnerable to great power shaping, as these powers aim to shape the strategic environment by exploiting vulnerabilities and limiting foreign policy alternatives. Indeed, through a process we could describe as 'strategic curbing': an intended, planned and targeted shaping approach by great powers to reduce the strategic autonomy of small and medium states, limit their foreign policy orientations and induce alignment with proclaimed geopolitical storylines, objectives and values, while constraining the influence and capabilities of rival powers.

Statecraft repertoires of great powers include a variety of shaping options, from diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions to military containment and deterrence. The 'sets of repertoires' used by great powers in performing strategic curbing are, however, more tailored, need to be aligned with 'geopolitical scripts', and thus must be flexible and adaptable.

We will distinguish several sets of repertoires which are relevant for the case of the strategic curbing of Serbia's foreign policy options.

The first one is related to restricting foreign policy hedging, or 'de-hedging'. While it has been used in finance, where 'de-hedging is the act of unwinding positions initially established as hedges in a trade or investment portfolio' (Trade Locker, 2024), Mitić discusses the term in IR.

He points out that 'de-hedging' is due to external influences, albeit the decisions involve cooperative actions by the local authorities: 'For the EU and the US, these initiatives are part of the process of rooting out strategic rivals from the Balkans. Brussels would call it a return to the 'normal' incentives for EU accession: positive signals to investors, motivation for internal political reforms, and gradual and partial integration into the Union's sectoral policies' (Mitić, 2024a). Thus, for Mitić, de-hedging implies policies and narrative tools, pursued by external actors, aimed at encouraging a sovereign state to reduce, if not abandon its hedging strategy in the context of geopolitical competition.

One of these narrative tools is 'obstructive framing'. 'Framing', as 'selection and salience' in order 'to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993, p. 45), is a rational rhetorical strategy used by politicians to 'angle' arguments presented to the general public as frames can provoke different reactions of the public depending on the element of reality they are accentuating or hiding. 'Strategic framing' involves the 'purposeful use of this technique by rhetors, social advocates, and communications professionals', whose goals are 'to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on particular portions of a message or aspects of a topic in order to gain a favorable response' (Hallahan, 2008, p. 4855). Strategic framing is an integral part of strategic communication campaigns, which seek to 'use message frames to create salience for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects' (Hallahan, 2008, p. 4856). Thus, 'obstructive framing' has a clear objective of focusing attention on the negative aspects of a policy or action of an actor or its cooperation with a partner deemed rival by the framing strategist.

In order to limit the participation of a country in rival partnerships and alliances, powers attempt to create wedges which could weaken or rupture their cooperation. Thus, 'wedging' strategies use statecraft repertoires to 'move or keep a potential adversary out of an opposing alliance': 'Coercive ones rely chiefly on threats and punishment to influence the target state's alignment', while 'accommodative ones emphasise inducements' (Crawford, 2021). In particular, using 'selective accommodation', the 'divider' does 'not conciliate indiscriminately' but

'does so in a fashion calculated to achieve strategic effects against the constellation of opposing forces' (Crawford, 2021).

One of them is 'co-opting', that is integrating the actor closer to own organizational structures, norms and values, by offering incentives and privileges in exchange of compliance. This tool gives a particular advantage to powers/states or groups of states with an extended and comprehensive network of structures. Furthermore, co-opting can be facilitated by soft power and overall attractiveness of the co-opter, as well as public opinion support for the integration of their state in the co-opter's structures.

On the other side, 'cornering' is a coercive strategy which aims to severely restrict foreign policy manoeuvrability of a state through threats of isolation and use of force/sanctions. Instead of a promise of integration, as in the case of 'co-opting', here the focus is on marginalization.

CURBING SERBIA'S FOREIGN POLICY OPTIONS

Obstructive Framing

Already at the end of the Cold War and the outset of the Yugoslav crisis, the Western media Manichean 'Good vs Evil' narrative framed the Serbs as the ethnic group depicted in threat terms: as the 'nationalist', 'communist', 'oriental', 'dogmatic', 'hegemonic', 'autocratic' side versus the 'democratically-elected', 'Western', 'anti-communist', 'free market' and 'freedom-seeking' rest (Mitić, 2024a). Such framing became a backbone of the 1990s Western strategic narrative on the Yugoslav conflicts (Poggioli, 1993; Parenti, 2000; Morelli, 2001; Sévillia, 2004; Herman, 2006). While the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia sub[si]ded by the of the 20th century, and Serbia took the 'Western turn' following political changes in October 2000, the obstructive framing remained well into the f[ir]st quarter of the 21st century. Paradoxically, it remained such even in the early 2000s, at times when Russian influence was dramatically reduced and China's influence was non-existent, primarily due to the political West's attempt to justify its 'Yugoslav conflict narrative' and the flagrant violations of international law during the 1999 NATO aggression and the subsequent masterminding of 'Kosovo's UDI'. Following the 2008 'Kosovo UDI', which led to the comeback of Russo-Serbian collaboration, the negative framing turned to depicting such cooperation as a 'threat'. This was particularly

visible following the outset of the crisis in Ukraine in 2014, when Serbia, within months both started EU membership talks and refused to align with EU's anti-Russian sanctions. The political West saw Russo-Serbian cooperation as a hurdle for Western interests, particularly to NATO and EU enlargement in the region. As part of the 'narrative war' between the West and Russia, such portrayal became an integral part of strategic communication to promote the EU/NATO interests in the Western Balkans. A strategic frame analysis revealed the systematic building of a strategic narrative depicting Russian-Serbian cooperation as a 'hybrid threat' in the political, security, economic, energy, informational and non-governmental sectors (Mitić, 2020). Such framing was also present in the case of the Sino-Serbian cooperation after Beijing launched its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Central and Eastern European Countries framework (originally 16+1), where Serbia took an important role, particularly after President Xi Jinping's first visit to Belgrade in 2016. The particular target of Western negative framing have been the Chinese investments in Serbia's energy sector. The emergent strategic narrative framed China and the BRI as an 'umbrella for environmental problems', and Serbia adopting their problematic, 'toxic' model, according to which 'Chinese investments are not respectful of legal requirements and obligations', they 'excessively pollute' and are a 'serious hazard' for the Serbian people, leading to protests (Mitić, 2024a).

In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the negative framing of Russo-Serbian and Sino-Serbian cooperation was strengthened, setting the scene for curbing actions.

Co-opting

Since the outset of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in 2022, the political West, and the EU in particular, struggled to draw non-Western countries into the anti-Moscow sanctioning policy. Among EU candidate countries, Serbia stood up as an exception. In its official position expressed in the days following February 24, 2022, Serbia supported Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemned Russia's move, but stated it would not sanction Moscow. Such position attracted considerable criticism, pressure and warnings from Brussels. Yet, Belgrade persisted in its position. Western

capitals thus sought to co-opt Serbia in alternative EU-related forums, where Belgrade officials were expected – in the name of EU candidacy - to commit to support for Kiev without formally changing the official policy of non-sanctioning Moscow. These have included head-of-state level meetings such as the EU-Western Balkans summit (Council of the European Union, 2024), the Ukraine-Southeast Europe summit format (Beta, 2024), the European Political Community (Council of the European Union, 2025) or the Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland (N1, 2024). Others have included events supporting Euro-Atlantic integration such as the Dubrovnik and Globsec forums. Serbia's representatives, however, often refrained from adhering to the joint declarations when they included calls for sanctions against Russia (NIN 2025, Central European Times, 2025). On the other side, Serbia committed to support for Ukraine's electricity grid system, to financial donations and to post-conflict reconstruction.

Cornering

The question of Kosovo and Metohija has become a focal point for Western pressure on Belgrade. Serbian authorities, trusting EU mediation and guarantees, signed in 2013 the 'Brussels Agreement', under which it retreated its institutions from its southern province in exchange for the perspective of the formation of the 'Community of Serb municipalities'. Yet the EU failed to keep its word, and by mid-2025 the 'Community of Serb municipalities' never materialized. Furthermore, sensing that the context of the conflict in Ukraine provided an opportunity for increased pressure on Belgrade, Western capitals presented Serbian authorities with an ultimatum, delivered to Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić on January 20, 2023 by the so-called 'Quint' – envoys from the US, Germany, France, Italy and the EU. The ultimatum faced Belgrade with the options of either accepting the so-called 'French-German Proposal' – calling for the 'normalization' of relations with Priština through a 'de-facto' recognition of 'Kosovo' - or facing Western sanctions (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023). Such cornering policy was reminiscent of the 1990s ultimatums delivered in the context of the Yugoslav conflicts, in particular ahead of the 1999 NATO aggression.

In yet another example of a cornering policy, the departing administration of US President Joseph Biden, in the days before exiting the White House in January 2025, set in motion a mechanism aimed at sanctioning Serbia's NIS petroleum company. The aim of the mechanism was to reduce the majority ownership of the company by Russia's Gazpromneft. After intense negotiations within the US-Serbia-Russia triangle, the sanctions were postponed without full resolution by mid-2025. Yet, the fate of NIS, as largest contributor to Serbia's budget, became a particularly delicate affair and a clear political Western signal to Belgrade (Reuters, 2025a).

De-hedging

The Western policy turned at Serbia's de-hedging from the East became particularly visible throughout 2024. In the security field, Serbia purchased 12 Rafale warplanes from French Dassault Aviation instead of Chinese J-10s, despite previously purchasing China's FK-3 anti-aircraft system (Ruitenberg, 2024; Military Watch Magazine, 2024). French President Emmanuel Macron hailed the 2.7 billion contract as an 'opening towards a strategic change' and an 'opportunity for Europe' (France, 2024).

In the energy sphere, the trend aimed at pushing for a geopolitical – but economically questionable - diversification of the Russian energy portfolio had been present for several years, in particular since the Turkish Stream (Balkan Stream) gas pipeline - transporting natural gas from Russia to Turkey and southeastern Europe - came into operation in the early 2020s. The trend intensified with the building of interconnectors with Bulgaria, linked to Greek ports and LNG from non-Russian sources at the end of 2023 (Ministarstvo rudarstva i energetike, 2023). Several months later, under the auspices of German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz, the EU and Serbia signed an agreement on a strategic partnership regarding sustainable raw materials, battery value chains, and electric vehicles. Its key objectives have been to limit Belgrade's energy dependence on Russia, as well as to prevent China's access to lithium and other critical minerals in Serbia (Hodgson, 2024).

In the nuclear energy field, Serbia had been discussing cooperation with Russia's Rosatom agency for years. However, following 2022, pushes

were made towards partnerships with France, the United Kingdom and the US (Manojlović & Standish, 2024). Indeed, in September 2024, roughly at the time of agreements with France on Rafales and Germany on lithium mining, Serbia awarded a contract to French state-owned energy utility EDF and engineering company Egis Industries for a preliminary technical study for considering the peaceful use of nuclear energy (Balkan Green Energy News, 2024).

However, the key de-hedging move has been the decision of President Vučić not to attend the BRICS summit in Kazan in October 2024. A ministerial delegation was sent instead, while Vučić met in parallel in Belgrade with a host of EU leaders, including European Commission President Ursula Von der Layen, Polish and Greek prime ministers Donald Tusk and Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Mitić, 2024a).

Wedging

President Vučić's decision not to attend the BRICS summit did not come out of nowhere. It was rather made under intense Western pressure, clearly aimed at creating wedges between Belgrade and its Eastern partners, Russia and China. In fact, throughout Russia's 2024 BRICS presidency, Western statesmen, envoys, and media had been inquiring about Serbia's participation at the Summit, particularly after President Putin's invitation to President Vučić. Ahead of the summit, US portal 'Politico' commented that Serbia sits in a 'geostrategic grey zone, pulled between the authoritarian powers of Beijing and Moscow and more recently, after some years of neglect, the US and its European allies', and is 'one of the most important in-between places in the world today. Its fate will help determine which Great Power comes to dominate this century' (Kaminski, 2024). Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Admiral James Stavridis, warned that 'Serbia is becoming a focus of great power conflict, and the EU and NATO can bring it into the Western fold': 'The democratic world should be extremely concerned about Russia and China making major inroads into what is otherwise becoming a NATO peninsula', which is why 'Washington is wisely putting a full court press on Serbia' (Stavridis, 2024).

One of the key wedging moves had been the testing of Serbia's 'commitment to the West' through the selling of Serbian ammunition to NATO countries, such as the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, which then redirected them to Ukraine, igniting Moscow's fury at Belgrade (Reuters, 2025b).

In 2025, the US Atlantic Council took the task of driving wedges between Serbia and China. Its vice-president Matthew Kroenig argued his May 2025 visit to Serbia was aimed at countering Chinese narratives in the Serbian media, and called on Serbia's public institutions to do the same (Stevanović, 2025). Kroenig argued that Chinese investments were unreliable, polluting, and that Belgrade should avoid defence and technological cooperation with Beijing: 'When it comes to 6G and Serbia, my strong recommendation is not to allow Chinese companies, such as Huawei, to introduce 6G infrastructure' (Stevanović, 2025). Such argument was in line with the Atlantic Council's subsequent convening of a forum in Washington D.C. in June 2025, promoting US support for 5G infrastructure in Serbia, through a 50 million US EXIM Bank support to Telekom Serbia (Press Online, 2025). It was also in accordance with EXIM Bank's own mission to counter China's 5G under its 'China programme' (Thompson, 2023), as well as the so-called 'Washington Agreement', a wedge-prone document signed by Serbia's President Vučić in presence of President Trump in the White House ahead of the 2020 USA elections, which called for rejecting 5G infrastructure from 'untrusted vendors', in clear reference to Huawei (Ruge and Vladisavljev, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In spite of Western warnings, Serbia's President Vučić met with both presidents Putin and Xi in Moscow, on the margins of the May 9, 2025 Victory Day celebrations of the 80th anniversary of defeat of Nazi Germany. Following-up on the May 2024 meeting in Belgrade, Vučić and Xi agreed to increase coordination by setting a meeting of heads of state 'at least once a year', to increase mutual support and win-win cooperation. The fact that an EU country representative, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, also attended Victory Day celebrations, however, alleviated some pressure on Belgrade.

Similarly, Hungary's participation in trilateral talks with Serbia and Russia on building a new Hungary-Serbia pipeline connecting it to Russian oil through the Druzhba pipeline gave more space to Belgrade. As Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó argued: 'We're moving forward with Serbian and Russian partners to build a new oil pipeline between Hungary and Serbia. While Brussels is banning Russian energy, cutting links and blocking routes, we need more sources, more routes' (Tportal, 2025).

The ire directed at Bratislava and Budapest for joining Belgrade in 'non-harmonising' policies with the rest of the EU points to the fact that in the era of multipolarization, and particular in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the EU is unwilling to tolerate geopolitical dissonance. Such position in unlikely to change in the light of the securitization narrative and militarization over the 'Russian threat', but also uncertainty over the future level of American engagement in Europe, and overall transatlantic relations.

On the other side, Belgrade has, expectedly, shown resilience to Western efforts, in large part because of the need for Russia's and China's support over key national issues of Kosovo and Metohija and Republika Srpska, but also due to energy, economic and infrastructure building cooperation (Stekić and Mitić, 2025). However, this assessment also mirrors wider geopolitical dynamics, which have shown that multipolarization is irreversible, and that, instead of succumbing to Western strategic curbing of its foreign policy options, Belgrade should attempt to persevere in maintaining, if not boosting, its Eastern and Southern strategic alternatives. On the other side, Serbia's government has remained committed to pursuing EU negotiations talks, and it has attempted to reboot relations with Washington, particularly in the light of President Trump's second term in the White House. Thus, the challenge for Serbia's foreign policy is to remain diplomatically fully engaged in constant risk management, while being flexible and diversified, in order to remain afloat without getting boiled in the 'pressure-cooker' created by the interaction of global powers packing the congested geopolitical hotspot.

The Serbian case, while unique in several features, also addresses the question of the effectiveness of the West's shaping capacities. The panoply of the statecraft repertoire available to Western states, particularly the EU, is wide – at bilateral, minilateral and multilateral levels. Yet, the reach of the implemented measures, including those aimed at curbing foreign policy diversification of a small state in formal membership negotiations

with the EU, shows considerable limitations and the need for a more serious 'reality check' in Brussels to find an adequate, not assumed place, in the multipolarizing world.

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