

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Commentary



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Passing clay pots through walls

By Alessandro Politi

Director of the NATO Defense College Foundation

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The situation of Serbia and the Western Balkans in a global context can be summed in three main issues: nature of external influences in the region and their possible management; what best practices can be useful in the area; how to harmonise existing pol-mil realities with the global order reshuffling and crisis.

External influences

Serbia's geopolitics are unfortunately rather simple and difficult: it is historically, and for time being, a landlocked and failed national unification nucleus with a very unfavourable strategic correlation of forces vis-à-vis practically any major competitor or adversary. If a historical

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comparison might help, it is like Piedmont (more precisely the Kingdom of Sardinia) before 1859, when it ended (after 350 years) its situation of clay pot among iron ones and became the unifying force for Italy. If an anticipation of the future might caution, it is probably like England will be after the Brexit with the loss of Scotland first and Wales/Northern Ireland later.

This forces local elites to adopt balancing foreign policies trying to maximise the benefits of relationships that can be at odds one another. In these conditions public monitoring is relatively possible as soon as concrete initiatives emerge: e.g. the creation of a bank, the construction of a railway, the sale of weapon systems, a diplomatic stance etc. Evidently other aspects (decision makers' intentions, preparations, off scene agreements) are more hidden to the public, but can emerge more easily to daylight than in the past thanks to pervasive communications. On the other hand, public monitoring requires more linguistic knowledge than during the past Cold War, since in addition to Russian, non-governmental organisations need to understand Chinese, Arabic, Turkish and other less common languages to Euro-Atlantic environments.

The main problem of course is first of all what the Serbian elite really wants or perceives as feasible and what choices will it carry out. Secondly, the Euro-Atlantic community has to make up its mind in a relatively fast and coherent way and here one can refer to the famous “To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there’s the rub” because in the coming two years the main actors of this community in turmoil have increasing difficulties to speak and act with one voice.

This leads us to a second issue, namely the correct evaluation of third actors interests' impact on the stability and security of this community. I would like to mention some analytical dilemmas in assessing the role of some countries in the Western Balkans. If we take for instance Russia, the usual consensus is that it is a danger and indeed at least one country can show how Russian influence (in good company of other acquiescing Western countries) supported the continuation of an undemocratic regime. Nevertheless, considering the problem at a more strategic level

shows a country capable of carrying out hybrid operations in Ukraine and Syria, but much weaker than NATO at social, economic and military level, exception made for some types of nuclear weapons. Dedicating excessive resources to the “Russian threat”, means to expose the Euro-Atlantic community to other more serious risks. Russia is a manageable risk, provided one is vigilant (more in the next section) and with a faster decision cycle than today. It is an adversary that must be “conged” because it is a fragile great power whose collapse would be a much greater geopolitical catastrophe than the dissolution of the Soviet Union

China is another fall guy à la mode and its lack of political flexibility in the Hong Kong affair

reinforces this negative situation. I will spare you the well-known list of Chinese problems and evils; I would like instead to point out that Beijing's influence in the Balkans cannot be described as destabilising or threatening any state or local authority. Differently from Russia, this is a formidable counterpart at strategic level but its economic development is part and parcel of the present globalisation and its market penetration methods are hardly different from what has done by Western countries during the whole XX century and by the biggest ones also in this century. Chinese companies and their government must be held accountable by the same standards as our companies and governments, but commercial wars and rigged competition are tantamount to jeopardise free trade and to encourage neonationalist movements (variously dubbed as populist or sovereigntist) that can not only wipe out badly needed economic development but bring in time to a major armed conflict. The Belt and Road Initiative and G5 are the among the biggest real economy global projects available and need to be negotiated in a determined and professional way, making them transparent and sustainable, but avoiding neonationalist manipulations that have more to do with crude lobbyism and less with national security.

Different Arab countries are also put in this lot because they do finance the spread of non-local Islamic strands and might inadvertently nurture extremist Takfiri groups, but, while again vigilance is necessary, it is probably more important to find time to think about regional energy alternatives to fossil and nuclear ones for very obvious reasons as we shall see in the next section of this intervention.

In a nutshell: Serbia's balancing act might be also tied to very specific domestic interests, but it is much more structural than one would like to see, because the Euro-Atlantic environment in much more unstable than we would like. The clay pot has to pass walls that are not only thick but also moving: therefore, agility is an advantage.

The essential has been long understood by Belgrade: there is only one side that has the economic beef to make sustainable the whole regional economy and it is Europe. Neutrality is of course important but so it is for all neutral countries in Europe. The rest is more desirable than valuable.

Western Balkans and best practices

I would first of all invite our friends to look beyond their wider neighbourhood because good ideas and policies have no borders and often do not depend from size, but from political quality in conception and application.

The whole of Europe is surely a good starting point and, allow me to tell you, Italy is not a bad one. Italy for instance has a long experience both in waging and staving off hybrid warfare. In 1860 with our 1.000 red shirts irregulars (several were dangerous foreign fighters from Hungary, Poland, Great Britain, France and Belgium, closely monitored by the then polices of all Europe) the Sardinian Kingdom annexed the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in addition to half of the Papal States, holding referenda *en bonne et due forme* without any major objection from the international community and controlling a surface 35 times bigger than Crimea. In 1936 Fascist Italy was on the forefront with Nazi Germany in destabilising and toppling the Spanish Republic with several techniques that anticipated current hybrid warfare. During the Cold War the new democratic Italian Republic successfully avoided two nationalist secessions, both manipulated by major foreign and non-Communist powers, weathered four attempted *coups d'état*, endured 20 years of terrorism (both black and red), avoided a serious foreign destabilisation during the kidnapping of former prime minister Aldo Moro and stopped cold a third secessionist attempt at the beginning of this century.

To make a long story short the political ingredients that allowed Italy to keep substantially its democratic governance against these threats were: a solid constitution and the substantial respect by all parties in parliament of the constitutional order; the ability to carry out inclusive politics towards ethnic and political minorities, provided they abandoned armed struggle; the tendency to avoid zero sum games between major opposing parties, finding instead a common pragmatic point of agreement while respecting most of their ideological tenets; a widespread welfare and a good mix of hard and soft power.

Even then the very real threat was represented by national and international organised crime, now transmogrified into transnational powerful cartels spanning across the globe. Learning how to overcome corruption and minimising the invasive presence of mafias is a continuous process with a truly global learning base. The worst hybrid threat is not the usual one, but the lethal combination between politics and organised crime: not even security conscious countries like Israel are spared from this scourge.

Another subject of good practice are nowadays fake news. Disinformation: we should go back to the II WW lesson, be credible and do not lie. The first big fake news campaign was not Russian and it was about weapons of mass destruction. When one hears about UK being dominated by Brussels or hears clips like the ones that NATO is obsolete or brain dead, one might wonder about who stands for what in the Atlantic camp. The first job is doing our homework at home by being credible while communicating effectively against the hybrid level.

The other necessary step to take is to get out of Cold War paradigms (dezinformacija, spies, military, diplomats, etc.). When I was POLAD in KFOR in 2016-2017 I prepared for Commander's discussions a specific briefing on the new frontier of Russian influence. It was, is and will happen more and more in that grey area where business mixes with political action and lobbying influence. This is the opaque zone where people do profitable business and forge concrete ties: each of us has its own national and international examples where national interest and security were diluted into much mundane affairs, as for instance demonstrate the different Laundromat money laundering schemes. They are a classic situation where dubious banks trade effectively with "respectable" ones under the apparent blindness of governments.

Energy is a real cooperation challenge that needs concrete steps in two directions: the right mix of renewables and fossil sources and the right relationship with energy providers. The strategic energy dilemma is how to transition in an orderly, sustainable and cost/effective way towards renewables while avoiding to contribute to the collapse of governments in a very instable area like the Persian Gulf. At the same time these regional governments too can contribute to the non-proliferation regimes in monitoring the diffusion of nuclear energy plants in the Gulf, because it might entail a possible horizontal nuclear proliferation not only in Iran.

Bottom line: clay pots need to be smart and cooperative, because multilateralism is one of their best guarantees for some equal treatment in a rather dysfunctional multipolarism.

The last question (How to harmonize the new ideological and economic reshuffling with the existing military and political alliances?) is really the most arduous one. We are absolutely not at the end of history where there is no alternative to a single winning system: this was a dangerous illusion that we definitely need to shed off. The free market-democracy equation itself is in evident political and economic crisis because free markets have been replaced by invasive *de facto* private monopolies or oligopolies. At the same time false prophets are proliferating, agitating the promise of resurrecting mythical ancient identities that have nothing to do with the real spiritual and material needs of the majority of citizens and authoritarian leaders offer stale salvations that have already proven to be simply unworkable and very costly for the deluded subjects. Clay pots that insist in old 2.0 rehashes, risk to crumble away.

One must be in this case intellectually honest and politically sharp: old identities can not be kept behind walls where they will wilt out in less than a generation, they can only be transmitted to new composite ones that can grow out best through the respect of universal right declaration, the values of the Atlantic Charter (whose suggestions are strikingly actual) and of the ecologic sustainability principles in the encyclical letter of Francis I (Praised be). Economic tenets that are

not ecologically sustainable are simply suicidal for the human race and need a profound internal reform both of politics and alliances. Only in a spirit of a sincere and practical interoperability of human minds, respecting friends, different parties and counterparts, this change can be accomplished like the Fall of the Wall, bloodlessly.