

Guarding Europe's Vulnerable Core

NATO's Evolving Role in the Balkans

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Abstract

The Balkans remain one of Europe's most fragile yet strategically significant regions, where unresolved ethnic disputes, weak institutions, and external influence continue to intersect. NATO has long served as the principal stabilizing force, with missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR, later EUFOR with NATO support) and Kosovo (KFOR) providing the security framework for post-conflict reconstruction. Yet Russia continues to exert destabilizing influence, cultivating ties with Serbia, leveraging energy dependence, and amplifying disinformation to undermine Euro-Atlantic integration. The war in Ukraine has intensified these dynamics, heightening the dangers of instability spreading across the region and deepening geopolitical tensions. This paper examines NATO's evolving role as a stabilizing actor in the Balkans, evaluating the effectiveness of its missions, deterrence efforts, and partnerships with the European Union. It argues that reinforcing NATO's engagement is essential to safeguarding European security and reducing the likelihood of future crises.

1. Introduction: The Western Balkans as Europe's Vulnerable Core

The Western Balkans constitute one of Europe's most vulnerable strategic regions, where unresolved sovereignty disputes, ethnic divisions, and fragile institutions continue to generate periodic instability. Although large-scale conflict has not returned since the 1990s, tensions particularly between Serbia and Kosovo and within Bosnia and

Herzegovina demonstrate the region's persistent volatility¹. This fragility carries direct implications for European security, as crises in the Balkans have historically spilled across borders and challenged the continent's political order. NATO has long served as the primary stabilizing actor in this environment. Its interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SFOR) and later in Kosovo (KFOR) were decisive in ending violence, enforcing peace agreements, and shaping the post-conflict security structure². These operations marked NATO's evolution from a Cold War collective defence alliance into a crisis-management organisation capable of enforcing peace, protecting civilians, and supporting long-term stabilization.

However, the strategic context of the Western Balkans has shifted markedly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Euro-Atlantic enlargement has stalled, democratic backsliding has deepened, and unresolved disputes continue to produce local crises, including repeated confrontations in northern Kosovo since 2021³. At the same time, Russia and China have expanded their political, economic, and informational influence, *reinvigorating geopolitical competition in the region*.⁴ These dynamics have eroded earlier assumptions that the Western Balkans were on a linear trajectory toward stability.

This paper argues that NATO's role in the Balkans is not only ongoing but increasingly essential. To prevent renewed instability and counter external interference, the Alliance must adapt its posture, strengthen deterrence, and deepen cooperation with the European Union⁵. To understand NATO's present role in the Western Balkans, it is necessary to trace how the Alliance emerged as the region's principal security actor during the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia.

2. Historical Evolution of NATO in the Balkans

¹International Crisis Group, *Kosovo: Background and Unresolved Tensions*, various reports, accessed December 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/balkans/kosovo>.

²North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "NATO's Role in Kosovo," accessed December 2023, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/natos-role-in-kosovo>.

³International Crisis Group, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Deadlock and escalating tensions*, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/bosnia-and-herzegovina/bosnia-deadlock-serbs-strain-exit>

⁴Samuel Charap, "Consequences of the War in Ukraine: Turkey and the Balkans," *RAND Corporation Commentary*, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/03/consequences-of-the-war-in-ukraine-turkey-and-the-balkans.html>.

⁵NATO, "A Short History of NATO," 2023, accessed November 30, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/declassified_139339.htm.

NATO's engagement in the Balkans emerged from the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and gradually positioned the Alliance as the principal security guarantor in Southeast Europe. The limitations of early UN-mandated peacekeeping revealed the need for a more capable actor. As the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia escalated, NATO's role evolved from crisis response to comprehensive peace enforcement.

The Alliance's first major operational involvement occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina. After years of spiraling violence, NATO enforced the UN no-fly zone and on 28 February 1994 conducted its first-ever combat mission by shooting down four Bosnian Serb aircraft violating the ban⁶. The persistence of Serb attacks prompted the United Nations to request NATO airstrikes in August 1995. *Operation Deadeye*, followed by the more sustained *Operation Deliberate Force*, targeted Bosnian Serb military infrastructure and pressured the parties toward the Dayton Peace Agreement⁷. NATO subsequently deployed the Implementation Force (IFOR) in December 1995 and later the Stabilization Force (SFOR), becoming the central guarantor of Bosnia's military-security environment for the next decade.

A second turning point was the *Kosovo Crisis*. After the failure of the Rambouillet negotiations and the intensification of Serbia's campaign of ethnic cleansing against Kosovo Albanians, NATO launched *Operation Allied Force* on 24 March 1999 without UN Security Council authorization. The 78-day campaign compelled Belgrade to withdraw its forces and accept an international civil and security presence under UNSC Resolution 1244⁸. NATO Secretary General Javier Solana emphasized the operation's aims: to halt attacks on civilians and prevent further humanitarian catastrophe⁹. KFOR, established in June 1999, remains NATO's longest-running mission.

However, the Kosovo conflict did not end with the air campaign. The long-running dispute between Kosovo and Serbia (central to the conflicts of the 1990s) continued to shape regional stability. Belgrade and Pristina have never normalised relations, with Serbia refusing to recognise Kosovo's independence. The main point of contention today concerns the level of self-rule in the four northern Kosovo municipalities, home to a Serb majority and closely linked to Serbia. Since 2021, the persistence of the status dispute has given rise to recurrent violent protests and security crises, underscoring the structural fragility of the post-1999 order.

⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "Operations and Missions: Past and Present," July 10, 2023, accessed December 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ NATO, *Kosovo Air Campaign (March–June 1999): Operation Allied Force*, May 17, 2022, accessed December 5, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49602.htm.

⁹ Javier Solana, "Press Statement of 23 March 1999," *NATO Press Release* 40 (1999).

In Bosnia, the early 2000s marked a transition from NATO-led stabilization to EU-led peacekeeping. Under the *2003 Berlin Plus arrangements*, the European Union assumed command of the main mission through EUFOR Althea¹⁰, while NATO retained a headquarters focused on defence reform, partnership programmes, and maintaining the capacity to re-engage if necessary. This transition reflected the belief that the region had entered a post-conflict phase where political and institutional consolidation could gradually replace military stabilization.

Nevertheless, the Western Balkans remained “unfinished business.” Deep-rooted ethnic divisions, weak governance, and unresolved sovereignty disputes, especially between Serbia and Kosovo, continued to generate periodic crises. Even when the EU assumed primary responsibility in Bosnia, the credibility of the security architecture ultimately rested on NATO’s deterrent capacity and its willingness to act as the guarantor of last resort. While NATO’s interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were decisive in ending the conflicts of the 1990s, the early 2000s raised a different question: how to keep the region stable without relying on large numbers of international troops.

3. Consolidation and Transformation: NATO’s Strategic Adaptation After 2000

The early 2000s brought a gradual but important change in NATO’s role across the Western Balkans. After a decade marked by large-scale peace enforcement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the Alliance shifted toward a lighter footprint that focused less on managing active conflict and more on supporting long-term stability. This adjustment reflected a widespread belief at the time: that Euro-Atlantic integration (rather than direct military oversight) would eventually anchor peace in the region¹¹.

Bosnia and Herzegovina became the clearest example of this new approach. In December 2004, NATO transferred responsibility for maintaining a safe and secure environment from SFOR to the EU’s EUFOR Althea mission under the Berlin Plus framework. As Howorth notes, Berlin Plus allowed the EU to draw directly on NATO’s operational planning structures and command arrangements, including the use of DSACEUR as the operation’s strategic commander, ensuring that the handover did not disrupt the security environment or the implementation of the *Dayton Peace Agreement*.¹²

¹⁰ European External Action Service (EEAS), “EUFOR - Bosnia and Herzegovina: Military Operation ALTHEA,” accessed December 2023, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eufor-althea/eufor-bosnia-herzegovina-military-operation-althea-und-en?s=324>

¹¹ Oya Dursun-Ozkanca, “The Western Balkans in the Transatlantic Security Context: Where Do We Go from Here?” *Insight Turkey* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2019212.08>.

¹² Jolyon Howorth, *Security and Defence Policy in the European Union* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

This model gave the EU visible leadership while keeping NATO in the background as the strategic guarantor. Scholars generally agree that EUFOR Althea became the EU's flagship crisis-management mission, but one that still operated within a strategic architecture defined by NATO.¹³ Crucially, NATO did not withdraw from Bosnia following the transfer of authority. NATO Headquarters Sarajevo remained in place with a focused mandate to advance defence reform, supervise Bosnia and Herzegovina's participation in the Partnership for Peace framework, and provide political and technical support for the country's longer-term Euro-Atlantic integration. The handover therefore marked a shift in emphasis rather than a withdrawal.

Kosovo evolved along a distinct trajectory. Although KFOR gradually reduced its troop levels from around 50,000 personnel in 1999 to roughly 3,500–4,000 for most of the 2010s and early 2020s, the force was reinforced after renewed tensions in 2023–2024, bringing its strength to around 5,000 troops.¹⁴ Yet this reduction never translated into strategic disengagement. As Triantafyllou argues, the persistence of local tensions, especially in northern Kosovo, has meant that international governance frameworks have proved insufficient to address unresolved structural disputes, leaving KFOR as the essential guarantor of basic security and crisis containment.¹⁵ The recurrent flare-ups since 2021, including the confrontations that prompted NATO to deploy additional reinforcements in 2023 and 2024, underline how fragile the environment remains. Despite its downsizing, KFOR's mandate to ensure a safe and secure environment and guarantee freedom of movement remains as central to regional stability as it was two decades ago.¹⁶

Much of NATO's lighter posture in the 2000s rested on the assumption that EU and NATO membership prospects would sustain reforms and gradually stabilize the region. By the mid-2010s, however, this "integration paradigm" had lost momentum. Democratic backsliding, entrenched patronage networks, and a weakening of EU leverage limited progress, while European Commission reports continued to flag unresolved sovereignty disputes, particularly between Serbia and Kosovo, as major obstacles to long-term stability. As the credibility of Euro-Atlantic integration faded, external actors, most notably Russia and China, found new openings to expand their influence.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ NATO, *KFOR – Key Facts and Figures* (June 2023), <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/factsheets/kfor/KFOR-Placemat.pdf>.

¹⁵ Giorgos Triantafyllou, *KFOR & Provision of Security in Northern Kosovo: Tracing the Sources of Protracted Insecurity*, ELIAMEP Working Paper No. 48 (2014).

¹⁶ NATO, "NATO Operations and Missions," updated July 30, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/operations-and-missions/nato-operations-and-missions>.

Taken together, these trends show that while NATO shifted to a lighter posture, the underlying sources of instability never disappeared. The Alliance reduced its military presence, but its role as the region's ultimate security guarantor remained unchanged.

4. A New Strategic Environment: The Impact of Russia's War in Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reshaped the strategic landscape in which NATO operates across the Western Balkans. While the region lies outside the immediate battlefield, the geopolitical shockwaves have been felt intensely. The war revived a sharper, more confrontational form of great-power politics in Europe and exposed how quickly instability on the continent's periphery can spill over if left unaddressed. In a region such as the Western Balkans, where political fragility, institutional weaknesses, and unresolved ethnic disputes remain part of the fabric of everyday politics, this shift has raised the stakes. NATO's role as a stabilizing actor has therefore become even more important, not because new crises have emerged, but because the old ones now carry far greater geopolitical weight.

The most immediate effect of the post-2022 environment has been the renewed visibility of Russia's political and informational influence across the Western Balkans. Although Moscow lacks a substantive military presence in the region, its strategic objective remains consistent: to slow or obstruct further Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Recent analysis shows that the war in Ukraine has sharpened Russia's incentives to leverage existing political entry points in the Balkans, using energy dependence, media networks, and sympathetic political actors to weaken Western cohesion. Russian backing for secessionist narratives in Republika Srpska, as well as for Serbian nationalist positions on Kosovo, has amplified tensions that were already deeply rooted in local political dynamics.¹⁷

These external pressures interact with long-standing regional vulnerabilities. The Clingendael Institute's 2025 scenarios identify the lack of progress in the Serbia–Kosovo dialogue and secessionist tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina as the region's most persistent triggers of instability.¹⁸ The violent clashes in northern Kosovo since 2021,

¹⁷ Jeta Loshaj, *Between Continuity and Change: Russian Influence and Security Challenges in the Western Balkans Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, January 2024), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kosovo/20922-20240122.pdf>.

¹⁸ Clingendael Institute, *Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans* (2025).

including attacks on KFOR personnel, underline how unresolved sovereignty issues can quickly escalate into broader crises.¹⁹

With EU enlargement losing credibility, NATO has taken on a more active role once again, reinforcing KFOR and broadening its work on hybrid threats and crisis response. In this context, the assumption that integration alone could anchor stability has become increasingly untenable, making NATO's continued engagement indispensable.

5. Why the Balkans Still Matter: Strategic Logic and European Security

The Western Balkans remain strategically significant for Europe because instability in the region has repeatedly generated political and security shocks that extend beyond its immediate borders. Analysts frequently describe the Balkans as Europe's "internal frontier," a small but geopolitically dense space whose crises routinely spill over into the wider European security environment.²⁰ The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia revealed how quickly unresolved sovereignty disputes and institutional fragility can escalate, drawing in international actors and requiring sustained stabilization efforts. Today's tensions, from the ongoing Kosovo status issue to renewed secessionist talk in Bosnia and Herzegovina, make it evident that the region's underlying problems are still very much alive.

The region's geostrategic location further amplifies its relevance. Situated between the Adriatic, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea, the Western Balkans form a critical corridor for European energy diversification, transport connectivity, and supply-chain resilience. Crises in the region — from political breakdowns to hybrid attacks or governance failures — can easily disrupt essential infrastructure and put pressure on Europe's wider economic system. For this reason, what happens in the Western Balkans matters directly for Europe's strategic stability. The Balkans also function as a contested geopolitical arena. External actors such as Russia and China hold influence through political, economic, and informational channels, complicating Europe's efforts to promote democratic reform and regulatory alignment. This means that unresolved issues matter even more today, as local disagreements become intertwined with bigger power struggles in Europe.

¹⁹ NATO, *KFOR – Key Facts and Figures* (June 2023), <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/factsheets/kfor/KFOR-Placemat.pdf>.

²⁰Mia Mungiu-Pippidi, "Where Should Europe End? Constructing the Eastern Question," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 62, no. 1 (2024): 88–105.

Finally, the region represents a test of Europe's credibility and strategic coherence. The weakening of EU enlargement has reduced Brussels's leverage, while NATO increasingly carries the burden of crisis management and deterrence. The earlier belief that integration on its own would secure long-term stability has weakened. Instead, the Western Balkans demonstrate that sustained Euro-Atlantic engagement and a more active security posture remain essential.²¹ Given this strategic importance, understanding how Euro-Atlantic institutions—NATO and the EU—interact in the region becomes central to assessing long-term stability.

6. NATO–EU Coordination: Potential, Constraints, and Strategic Necessity

Stability in the Western Balkans depends on effective cooperation between NATO and the European Union, whose roles in the region overlap but remain distinct. NATO provides deterrence, crisis response, and security guarantees, while the EU drives political reform, economic integration, and rule-of-law strengthening. Together, they form the core of the region's post-conflict security architecture, yet their coordination has long been constrained by institutional and political barriers.²² The *Berlin Plus Framework* is the clearest example of structured NATO–EU cooperation. It enabled the transition from NATO's SFOR to the EU's EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004, while preserving NATO's strategic oversight through DSACEUR. This arrangement reflected a broader reality: EU-led operations continue to rely on NATO's planning structures and military capabilities. However, Berlin Plus has rarely been replicated elsewhere, largely because of the unresolved Turkey–Cyprus issue, which restricts formal political dialogue and limits information-sharing between the two organizations. In Kosovo, cooperation is more informal. NATO's KFOR ensures security on the ground, while the EU's EULEX mission supports justice and policing. Although operational coordination is generally effective, broader strategic alignment remains difficult, particularly given that five EU member states do not recognize Kosovo's independence.

The post-2022 strategic environment underscores the need for deeper Euro-Atlantic coordination. Russia's political and informational influence in the region, along with the rise of hybrid threats, demands joint approaches to resilience, crisis management, and deterrence. Yet structural frictions persist, limiting the ability of NATO and the EU to act as a unified strategic actor. Strengthening this coordination remains essential for long-

²¹ Clingendael Institute, *Security and Stability Scenarios for the Western Balkans* (2025).

²² John Helderich, "Trapped in the Grey Zone: NATO-CSDP Relations in a New Era of European Security Governance," *International Politics* (2024).

term stability in the Western Balkans.²³ Despite progress in several areas, persistent structural constraints still limit Euro-Atlantic cohesion, underscoring the need for a comprehensive policy approach.”

7. Conclusion: Policy Priorities for a Stable and Secure Western Balkans

The Western Balkans remain vulnerable to instability where unresolved disputes and external interference continue to undermine stability. While NATO has been the central guarantor of security since the 1990s, the post-2022 environment has elevated the urgency of sustained and coordinated engagement. Russia’s intensified influence operations, democratic backsliding, and stalled EU enlargement collectively heighten the risk of renewed crises.

A policy response must therefore prioritize three pillars: reinforcing NATO’s deterrence posture, deepening NATO–EU operational coordination, particularly in crisis management and hybrid-threat response and strengthening local resilience through defence reform and political conditionality. The region’s stability will depend not only on NATO’s continued presence, but on a coherent Euro-Atlantic strategy that aligns military assurance with political and institutional support. Without this, the Western Balkans will remain Europe’s most vulnerable geopolitical corridor.

²³ Aybike Yalçın-Işpır, “NATO and EU Strategic Security Environment,” in *Polarization, Shifting Borders and Liquid Governance*, ed. Anja Mihr and Chiara Pierobon (Cham: Springer, 2023), 43–57.