



Balkan 2024
**Defence
Monitor**

Strategic Documents



BCSP
Belgrade Centre
for Security Policy

REGIONAL OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS



REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Just like in 2021 and 2022, none of the Western Balkan countries adopted new defence strategies or national security strategies in 2023 either. The Albanian National Security Strategy was last adopted in 2014, and its National Defence Strategy a year later. Bosnia and Herzegovina has its National Security Strategy 2006 and the National Defence Strategy 2008. Croatia's last National Security Strategy is from 2017, and the National Defence Strategy was adopted back in 2002. Montenegro's National Security Strategy was adopted in 2018, and the National Defence Strategy in 2019. North Macedonia has a National Security Strategy from 2003 and a more recent National Defence Strategy from 2020. Serbia has the National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy from 2020, although technically, the Serbian Parliament passed these documents in late December 2019.

The challenge identified in the previous iteration of the project "Balkan Defence Monitor 2023" still remains in play. That challenge is the inability of the Western governments to strategically plan and formulate policies, as this process remains traditionally burdened with dysfunctional politics and slow bureaucracies.¹ Moreover, this challenge is in no small part also caused by the fact that defence and security policy remains exclusively reserved for the political elites, who frequently monopolise the policy-making process and make it a top-down procedure. The professionals from the government administration are frequently marginalised from this process, and so is wider society.²

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the most troubling countries regarding its ability to adjust strategic and doctrinary documents with current trends in the regional, European, and global security, since its last National Security Strategy dates back to 2006 and the National Defence Strategy from 2008. The most recent strategic document in the region remains the North Macedonian National Defence Strategy of 2020, which had no foundation in the national security strategy that was last adopted in 2003. Given the enormous time span between these two documents, they are not convergent. The 2020 National Defence Strategy was primarily a product of the change which occurred when North Macedonia joined NATO that year, not of the comprehensive threat assessment envisaged by the National Security Strategies.

All of these documents are outdated, as none of them considers the transformations in European and global security generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. So far, Albania and North Macedonia are the only countries with indications that new strategic documents are underway. On the Albanian MoD's website, both the National Security Strategy and National Defence Strategy are designated as "work in progress."³ In early 2023, there were claims that a similar process was ongoing in North Macedonia,⁴ but so far, without the outcome of new strategies being put forth.

These old documents still provide some contextually salient points. A military invasion used to be defined as a possible, but not probable national security threat. Indeed, the return of full-fledged war to the Balkans remains unlikely, given the Western deterrence in the form of NATO and the fact that the Balkan elites are risk-averse regarding their survival in power.⁵ Equally important is that despite the weapons acquisition, the

1 Balkan Defence Monitor 2023, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), February 2023, <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/balkan-defence-monitor-2023/>

2 Politički lideri samovoljno odlučuju o kupovini vojnih dronova (Political leaders arbitrarily decide on the purchase of military drones), Dnevnik zarobljene države (The Diary of Captured State) – Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), <https://zarobljavanje.bezbednost.org/politicki-lideri-samovoljno-odlucuju-o-kupovini-vojnih-dronova/>

3 Strategic Documents, Ministry of Defence – Republic of Albania, January 2024, <https://www.mod.gov.al/eng/index.php/security-policies/strategic-documents>

4 Discussion: Lack of transparency a common problem in defence sector in Western Balkan, European Western Balkans, 28 February 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/02/28/discussion-lack-of-transparency-a-common-problem-in-defence-sector-in-western-balkan/>

5 Dimitar Bechev, "War Won't Be Coming Back to the Balkans," War on the Rocks, 24 March 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/war-wont-be-coming-back-to-the-balkans/>

capacity of the Western Balkan countries to engage in a prolonged, all-out war because of the lack of a robust economy with sluggish growth⁶ and, more importantly, demographic decline⁷ is limited. This does not fully eliminate the possibility of an armed conflict, but significantly narrows the range of negative scenarios. Nevertheless, the weapons acquisition by the regional countries, security anxieties among all the Western Balkan countries caused by the Ukraine war, and localised acts of violence in the North of Kosovo will keep the idea of military invasion alive in the regional security discourse.

Nationalism and separatism are the common themes in all of the strategic documents. Despite being defined as national security threats within outdated strategic documents, paradoxically, these themes have become relevant in the regional security context. This is primarily due to practical developments, like the unresolved dispute over Kosovo's status between Belgrade and Priština, the political instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the well-established ability of the local political and security elites to invoke nationalism in order to strengthen their political legitimacy. Economic instability, mentioned in these strategic documents, is another issue that will become relevant in the future as uncertainty looms on handling the economic fallout from the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, rising living costs, higher prices of energy and food and inflation.

Terrorism and organised crime are referred to in these old documents. Organised crime is a transnational threat, not a novelty in the Western Balkans. Still, terrorism can potentially become more acute in case of any overspill from the Middle East in the context of the current Gaza conflict and religious radicalisation, particularly among the Balkan nationals who returned to their home countries after fighting for various militant and Jihadi groups in Middle Eastern conflicts.⁸ The old West-centric agenda and commitment to peacekeeping mentioned in the old documents are still relevant. This is evident from the fact that NATO and the US dominate as security partners for all of the countries of the region, including those countries that are not NATO members, particularly in areas like international military exercises and peace missions. While Serbia has no ambition to join NATO, the 2023 trends show that the US became the dominant Serbian partner in military affairs. Belgrade's decision to exempt the "Platinum Wolf 2023" exercise with the US from the government's ban on international military exercises and the Serbian participation in the US-led peace mission in Sinai witness to this change.⁹

Strategic documents are normally intended to explain and justify major changes in national defence policies. However, while it is true that adopting new strategies is a long process in every country, it is evident that major policy decisions are made without having a solid foundation in strategic documents. Since 2015, Serbia and Croatia have been in the forefront of acquiring new weapon systems.¹⁰ Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama pledged in July 2023 that his country would reach the 2% defence spending threshold mandated by NATO.¹¹ More recently, Serbian military officials again flaunted the idea of reinstating compulsory military service, a narrative that reappears almost every year in Serbia.¹²

In that context, strategic documents would primarily illuminate to the national public in the Western Balkan countries what international, strategic, and internal factors drive the policies. The latter is particularly important in demonstrating to society and citizens that national security is a public good, not just a privileged portfolio of the ruling political parties. Moreover, publishing strategic documents is also a valuable way to be more transparent about one's intentions, which helps build transparency among local countries and helps ease the tensions and potential security rivalries.

6 Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, The World Bank, Fall 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/western-balkans-regular-economic-report>

7 Isabelle Marchais, "Depopulation in the Western Balkans," Jacques Delors Institute, July 2023, <https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/les-balkans-occidentaux-en-voie-de-depeuplement/>

8 Vuk Vuksanovic, "The Spillover Effect: The Gaza Conflict and Potential Ramifications to the Western Balkans," Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), January 2024, pp. 5-6, <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/the-spillover-effect-the-gaza-conflict-and-potential-ramifications-to-the-western-balkans/>

9 Igor Mirosavljević, "Through military exercise with NATO members, Serbia leans towards cooperation with the West," European Western Balkans, 27 April 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/04/27/through-military-exercise-with-nato-members-serbia-leans-towards-cooperation-with-the-west/>

10 Vuk Vuksanovic and Marija Ignjatijevic, "What's Behind the Arms Buildup in the Balkans," War on the Rocks, 28 December 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/whats-behind-the-arms-buildup-in-the-balkans/>

11 Alice Taylor, "Albania pledges to reach 2% NATO spending target by 2024," Euractiv, 10 July 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albania-pledges-to-reach-2-nato-spending-target-by-2024/>

12 Mila Manojlovic and Andy Heil, "Serbia's Vucic Weighs A Return To Military Conscription, Stirring Anger To His Left And Right," Radio Free Europe, 11 January 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-conscription-vucic-anger-modernizing-military/32770746.html>

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: 2014

NO CHANGES IN 2023

NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY: 2015



National interests and goals (as defined in the Strategies): Protection and consolidation of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of the Republic of Albania // Strengthening fundamental freedoms, human rights and the rule of law // Protection and promotion of the interests of Albanians wherever they may be // Preservation and development of national identity



Main threats: Organised crime // Corrupt individuals // Terrorism // Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range weapons



Main principles of national security policy: Accountability and transparency // Activities of the Armed Forces based on the Constitution and subject to democratic control of competent institutions // Small, efficient and profiled force based on personnel rather than heavy weaponry // Promoting gender equality and increasing women's participation



Regional cooperation: Peace, stability and prosperity in the region are of strategic importance to Albania. Our interest is to have a region that is integrated into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures, where inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony reigns. This will be realised through good neighbourly relations, cooperation in good faith, respect for minorities and inclusion. Relations between the countries of the region have improved, and cooperation has increased both qualitatively and quantitatively. Integration processes are catalysts for democratic reform, cooperation, good neighbouring relations and the reconciliation process. Promoting sustainable economic development will be achieved through deep regional economic integration aimed at creating an open and free regional market as a precondition for the region's European and Euro-Atlantic integration.



Regional threats: Problems in the region can still be caused by extreme nationalism. The existence of divided societies continues to pose a potential threat, due to the potential reopening of the border issue. Political exploitation and failure to exercise the rights of certain ethnic or minority groups could continue to cause sporadic tensions and generate negative consequences in bilateral and multilateral relations. Unresolved interstate disputes and problems can affect the quality of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, slowing down integration processes.



NATO membership: Membership in the North Atlantic Alliance is an inherent guarantee of national security, and the Republic of Albania is committed to fulfilling the obligations arising from said membership.



Relations with the EU: Albania's membership in the European Union is the country's most important strategic goal for the next decade. EU integration is also linked to the country's participation in the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy.



International military cooperation: Albania is committed to actively promoting regional and global peace and stability, increasing its role in regional and international organisations, and to participating in missions led by the UN, NATO and the EU.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: 2006

NO CHANGES IN 2023

NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY: 2008



National interests and goals (as defined in the Strategies): Protection and consolidation of National interests and goals (as defined in the Strategies): Establishing and developing security system institutions that will be able to respond to all risks and threats // Accession to international security conventions, European and Euro-Atlantic structures



Main threats: Political and social animosities caused by the war and nationalist extremism // Incomplete implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement // Problems related to political transition // Critical regional points, such as Kosovo and Metohija



Main principles of national security policy: Democratic, civilian control of the military and parliamentary oversight // Transparency of defence-related activities, including defence planning and budgeting // Integration into Euro-Atlantic collective security structures



Regional cooperation: Bosnia and Herzegovina has no territorial claims involving neighbouring and other states, nor does it perceive neighbouring and other states as hostile and a possible threat to its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Therefore, it is especially important that BiH further develops good neighbourly relations based on the principles of equality and cooperation. Improving good relations and cooperation with neighbours and countries in the wider region, the development of democratic processes in these countries, and the process of their European integration have a positive impact on strengthening the internal security of Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Regional threats: South-east remains the most sensitive area of today's Europe. Efforts toward secession, autonomy and independence of certain ethnic groups are still present in this area, which, together with the relatively high concentration of military capacities, further complicates the overall security situation.



Relations with NATO: The key element for achieving the unquestionable collective military security of Bosnia and Herzegovina is to become a member of NATO, as in that case its national sovereignty and territorial integrity would be guaranteed by the Alliance. Membership in the Partnership for Peace is the first step in that direction. Further reform in the field of defence, which will lead to full professionalisation, equipping and training the BiH Armed Forces in accordance with NATO standards, will enable BiH to make a significant contribution to achieving the goals of the Security Policy in the future.



Relations with the EU: The commitment to gradual integration into the European Union implies readiness to accept the provisions, legal structure and organisational mechanisms of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.



International military cooperation: As an active participant in collective security at the global level through membership in the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina is engaged in international peace efforts.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: 2017

NO CHANGES IN 2023

NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY: 2002



National interests and goals (as defined in the Strategies): Security of the population // Territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia // Strengthening the international reputation and influence of the Republic of Croatia // Ensuring the survival, protection of the identity and the political subjectivity of the Croatian people as constitutive in Bosnia and Herzegovina // Protection and support of Croats in other countries, and emigration



Main threats: Unresolved issues on delimitation with certain neighbouring countries // Political and intelligence activities of countries and non-state factors that perceive the European Union and NATO as a security threat // Terrorist attacks



Main principles of the national security policy: Parliamentary, professional and civil oversight of the legality of the work of the security and intelligence system // Inclusion of population in the civil protection system



Regional cooperation: The Republic of Croatia emphasises investing in the stability of the Southeast neighbourhood, viewing the Euro-Atlantic integration and the implementation of reforms as key factors and instruments for achieving stability and security. The Republic of Croatia will therefore systematically act in support of democratic processes, stabilisation, and access of countries in Southeast Europe to Euro-Atlantic integration. The Republic of Croatia will endeavour to seek a solution to the open issues of delimitation through direct negotiations or through proceedings before an international judicial body.



Regional threats: Political instability, underdeveloped state institutions, corruption, the high unemployment rate and social and ethnic tensions make the security situation in our Southeast neighbourhood fragile. Although Euro-Atlantic influence is still dominant, the space is also open to the influence of other global and regional actors and geopolitical competition and various destabilising external influences are reflected in this area as well. The Croatian neighbourhood shows trends of increasing intolerance, radicalism and extremism, especially Islamist radicalism.



NATO membership: For the Republic of Croatia, NATO is the guarantor of peace, stability and security. The membership of the Republic of Croatia in NATO provides a convincing guarantee of collective defence as an important factor in deterring and defending the population, territory, and national sovereignty. Appropriate military and civilian capabilities for deterrence and defence will be developed to carry out the tasks of the NATO Preparedness Action Plan as a contribution to the credibility of Allied solidarity and NATO cohesion.



EU membership: The Republic of Croatia will actively contribute to missions and operations within the Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union and participate in the association and the sharing of initiatives and projects of the European Defence Agency.



International military cooperation: The Republic of Croatia will contribute to the efforts aimed at strengthening international security and stability by participating in international missions and operations, as well as crisis response operations of international organisations, in particular the United Nations, NATO, the European Union, OSCE, and the Council of Europe.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: 2018

NO CHANGES IN 2023

NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY: 2019



National interests and goals (as defined in the Strategies): Protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Montenegro // Internal stability, protection of life and property of citizens and economic goods // Protection of democracy and rule of law, and guarantee and protection of human rights and freedoms



Main threats: Armed aggression // Terrorism and violent extremism // Proliferation of conventional arms and weapons of mass destruction // Cyber and hybrid threats // Organised crime



Main principles of national security policy: Development of military capacities and capabilities necessary for the execution of dedicated missions and tasks in the country and within the collective security system // Further development of military capabilities in line with the NATO defence planning process



Regional cooperation: The region generates a common vision of the future despite certain difficulties. Montenegro strives - through regional development cooperation and by enhancing transparency, dialogue and good neighbourly relations - to contribute to avoiding misunderstandings and improving security opportunities and stability in the region. Montenegro is committed to developing good neighbourly relations and strengthening regional co-operation, in terms of security as well as in other areas of common interest.



Regional threats: The region is still burdened by past events and unresolved issues that could cause destabilisation in certain areas. Geostrategic shifts have made the Western Balkans once again a zone of strong interest of certain international actors whose primary goal is to prevent the further European and Euro-Atlantic path of some countries in the region. This imposes concrete actions on the region, especially those of a hybrid nature, which poses a serious security challenge and can have significant consequences for regional stability and slow down the integration processes.



NATO membership: Montenegro has recognised that the best guarantee of long-term and sustainable security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state is access to the collective and cooperative security and defence system brought about by NATO membership. Therefore, active participation in the collective security system, NATO activities, missions and operations is a key prerequisite for protecting Montenegro from armed threats and other identified threats to national security.



Relations with the EU: NATO membership has significantly strengthened Montenegro's international position and facilitated the achievement of another key foreign policy goal - accession to the European Union. EU membership will further improve the security climate in the region and strengthen Montenegro's capacity to respond to current challenges, risks, and threats.



International military cooperation: Montenegro contributes to international stability through active participation in EU missions and UN peacekeeping missions and operations. Montenegro is developing its capacity to participate in NATO missions, operations and other activities in line with its membership obligations.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: 2003

NO CHANGES IN 2023

NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY: 2020



National interests and goals (as defined in the Strategies): Protection of independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Northern Macedonia // Strengthening regional security and stability // Membership in collective security systems // Effective management of natural disasters, technical and technological disasters, epidemics and climate change



Main threats: Insufficient economic growth // Corruption // Organised crime // Insufficient capacity and politicisation of democratic institutions // Foreign intelligence services delaying or hindering efforts to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community // Radicalism and extremism // Terrorism // Illegal migration // Cyber threats



Main principles of national security policy: Collective defence // Professionalism and adequate and equitable representation of communities // Application of the principle of gender equality in all the phases of defence policy and planning



Regional cooperation: Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations have a positive impact on security in the region. Countries in the region are aware that co-operation and good neighbourly relations are a precondition for building mutual trust, integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures and improving regional security, stability and economic growth. The Republic of Northern Macedonia sees full membership of all countries of the region in NATO or the EU as the best way to further improve and consolidate the security situation in the region of Southeast Europe and beyond.



Regional threats: The region remains burdened by its history and continues to face problems that can lead to instability. Differences of national, ethno-religious and cultural character and conflicting goals and interests can be a challenge to the security and safety of the region.



Relations with NATO and the EU: Strategic commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration and membership in collective defence and security systems remain a top priority of our defence policy, focused on joining NATO and the EU. After full membership in NATO and the EU, we will fully participate in collective defence and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The military will maintain military capabilities which are compatible and interoperable with the NATO Code of Capabilities. It will also improve the existing capabilities and provide conditions for integration and adequate contribution of the national defence system to the collective defence of the Alliance.



International military cooperation: North Macedonia will develop strength and capabilities to participate in international peacekeeping and security operations and missions, in line with national security interests and international obligations. We will support regional and international peace, security and stability through active participation in NATO and EU-led operations and missions, as well as in international peacekeeping, humanitarian and observation operations led by the UN, and through participation in various forms of military cooperation at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.

NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY: 2020

NO CHANGES IN 2023

NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY: 2020



National interests and goals (as defined in the Strategies): Preserving sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity // Preserving internal stability and security // Protection of the Serbian people wherever they live // Preserving peace and stability in the region and the world // European integration and membership in the European Union



Main threats: Separatist aspirations // Ethnic and religious extremism // Covert activities of foreign factors // Organised crime // Illegal migration



Main principles of national security policy: Democratic standards // Cooperation policy // European foreign policy orientation // Military neutrality // Developing the concept of total defence



Regional cooperation: Regional security is increasingly based on joint and coordinated activities in the field of security, politics and economy, other areas aimed at preserving stability and preventing crises in this region, and on the common interest of the region's countries to join the European Union. Activities within the framework of regional initiatives and the construction of joint mechanisms for the prevention of risks and threats, and for crisis management, create conditions for the accession of all countries in the region to the European Union.



Regional threats: Ethnic and religious alienation, and different interpretations and attempts to revise history, are creating limitations in the process of stabilising the region. Other factors that threaten regional security are non-military threats, including separatist aspirations and ethnic, religious and political extremism. The risk of outbreak of wars and other armed conflicts in Southeast Europe, although reduced, have not been eliminated.



Relations with NATO: The development of partnership cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and NATO, based on the policy of military neutrality and through the Partnership for Peace programme, contributes to the stability of the Republic of Serbia and contributes to bilateral relations with the countries of the region that are members of NATO. The Republic of Serbia does not intend to become a member of NATO or any other military-political alliance.



Relations with the EU: Improving national security and defence through the process of European integration contributes to the full membership of the Republic of Serbia in the European Union. (Serbia) is firmly committed to contributing to the European Union's Common Foreign, Security and Defence Policy as part of the accession process and integrating into the concepts of that European policy.



International military cooperation: Through the participation of military and civilian capacities in multinational operations and missions of the United Nations, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Republic of Serbia will improve its position as a reliable partner in international relations. Special attention will be paid to the trade in weapons and military equipment, because the suppression of illegal trade is a continuous commitment of the Republic of Serbia.



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