

BUILDING LEVERAGE

TÜRKIYE AS SECURITY PROVIDER IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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BCSP Belgrade Centre
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Introduction

In July 2023, Serbian Defence Minister Miloš Vučević, and now Serbian Prime Minister, publicly accused Türkiye of training, arming and conducting military drills with the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF), Kosovo's crisis response formation with the explicit purpose of transforming the KSF into full-fledged army by the year 2028.¹ This is a process that Serbia opposes as it continues to invoke the UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which does not accept any other armed formation on the ground except NATO's peacekeeping forces, the Kosovo Force (KFOR).² While there is a lot of political marketing in the rhetoric of Serbian leadership, this episode does show that Türkiye has become more assertive as a security provider in the Western Balkans in recent years. This policy has been motivated by Ankara's interest in winning new markets for its growing defence industry and, more importantly, building political leverage in the region. This policy became more pronounced in the context of the Ukraine war as Ankara uses the security anxiety that there may be an overspill to the region, giving Türkiye an opportunity to act more assertively in its regional security policy.

Ankara is Stepping Up

Ankara's security policy towards the region is multi-faceted. Türkiye has a history of peacekeeping in the region, which means that unlike Russia and China, which have no military presence in the region, Türkiye has boots on the ground. In NATO's KFOR mission in Kosovo, Türkiye is estimated to have 352 troops in Camp Sultan Murat in the historic city of Prizren.³ Ankara also has 242 members within the EU's peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, stationed in Fatih Sultan Mehmet barracks in Zenica. Turkish navy also has the right to use the Albanian naval base Pasha Liman based on the 1998 agreement.⁴ Regarding military diplomacy, Türkiye is well-positioned since within its embassies in all six Western Balkan countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina), it has a military attaché. In comparison, in the Middle East, Türkiye has no military attaché within its embassies in Israel, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Bahrain.⁵

Kosovo has been a particularly attractive partner for Ankara, which has been supplying and training Kosovo Security Forces. The list of hardware provided to KSF involves mortars Aselsan Alkar (120-millimetre calibre) and MKEK NT1 (81-millimetre calibre); a medium range anti-tank guided missile OMTAS; armoured tactical vehicles COBRA accompanied by remotely controlled battle stations (DUBS), and there is a plan to deliver towed howitzers Boran (105-millimetre calibre).⁶ Ankara also supplied the KSF with the multipurpose armoured vehicle BMC Vuran and trained the KSF members for its use.⁷ Bayraktar TB2 attack drones have been a particularly attractive product of the Turkish defence industry. In May 2023, Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) received five TB2 drones from Ankara seven months after the original agreement was signed.⁸ North Macedonia also purchased three batteries with 18 "Boran" howitzers from Türkiye in early 2023, with the first battery of six "Boran" howitzers planned to arrive by 2025 and the remaining two batteries in the period from 2029 to 2031.⁹

As a member of NATO, Türkiye regularly participates in bilateral and multilateral military exercises with NATO member states from the region, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.¹⁰ Military education has also been part of Ankara's defence engagement with the Balkans, as the Turkish Military Academy has a tradition of educating military cadets from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, which makes these cadets more attuned to the values and doctrine of the Turkish military.¹¹ In recent years, military education in Türkiye has also become available for military cadets from Montenegro.¹²

In recent years, Türkiye has tended to be the largest military donor to individual countries in the Western Balkans. In 2023, Türkiye was the largest foreign military donor to Montenegro, with donations valued at USD 1.2 million in the form of three logistic vehicles.¹³ This transaction was completed based on a 2019 agreement between Türkiye and Serbia that stipulated that the Turkish Ministry of Defence would donate

to the Montenegrin military EUR 16 million over five years, with EUR 15.5 million intended for the production of off-road vehicles and the rest used for the education of Montenegrin officers within Turkish military education system. Turkish military donations to Montenegro also involved uniforms and automatic rifles.¹⁴ In 2022, Türkiye was the largest military donor to Albania, with a donation of unspecified content that totalled USD 2,088,500.¹⁵

There have been arrangements with less conventional partners, primarily Serbia. In 2019, Ankara and Serbia signed a defence cooperation agreement,¹⁶ entailing military-industrial cooperation that should have allowed Belgrade to receive technology and “know-how” from Ankara while Ankara could use Belgrade as a platform to penetrate European defence markets more effectively. The fact that Ankara is willing to share technology as part of defence purchases, affordable prices, and the fact that Turkish defence companies are integrated with the production networks of American and European companies helps the Turkish defence industry in the Balkans and other regional markets.¹⁷ In 2023, researchers from Turkish Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University and the Serbian University of Niš began a NATO-approved project to develop an early warning system against a nuclear attack on NATO border states.¹⁸

Turkish Interest in the Balkans

What is behind this thrust in Türkiye's security engagement with the Western Balkans? For a start, there is an interest in acquiring new markets and customers for the growing Turkish defence industry. According to the Secretariat of Defence Industries, a body managing the Turkish defence industry under the auspice of the Office of the President of Türkiye, Turkish defence and aerospace exports went from USD 248 million in 2002 to USD 4.395 billion in 2022. Total Defense and Aviation Sector Turnover grew 12 times from USD 1.062 billion in 2002 to USD 12.196 billion in 2022. In 2002, the total budget of Turkish defence projects was USD 5.5 billion, with the project volume increasing 16 times to USD 90 billion.¹⁹

Speaking in January 2024, on the 97th foundation anniversary of the Turkish primary intelligence agency National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Erdoğan stated: "The defence industry, which was once 80 per cent dependent on foreign imports, has today become the export item with the highest added value for our country. In 2023, we broke the record of our Republican history by exporting defence products, worth \$5.5 billion. (...) As the indigenous-national product range of our defence industry expands, the means, capacities and capabilities of our Army and Security Forces, as well as the National Intelligence Organization, grow stronger."²⁰ Globally, between 2019 and 2023, Turkish share of global arms exports was 1.6 per cent, which is an increase of 106 per cent compared to the period between 2014 and 2018, when the share was 0.7 per cent, placing the country as the 11th largest global arms exporters.²¹

This effort to push the Turkish defence industry is also motivated by familial and interest links. The chairman of the board and chief technology officer of the Turkish group Baykar that manufactures the famed Bayraktar TB2 drones is Selçuk Bayraktar, the son-in-law of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Bayraktar's wealth and public prominence lead some to believe he may be Erdoğan's political heir.²² Turkish attempts to form an indigenous defence industry have also been locked in with Ankara's cooling ties with the West, domestic democratic regression and an attempt to use defence modernisation as a way for the Turkish government to promote new Turkish nationalism.²³ As both nationalism and Balkan diaspora (up to 18 million Turkish citizens are believed to have origins from the Balkans) are becoming more prevalent forces in Turkish domestic politics and, by extension, foreign policy,²⁴ the Balkans can also be used to push this techno-nationalism for domestic promotion.

Beyond just the commercial interest in finding new buyers for the products of the Turkish military industry, there has been a political and strategic logic of building influence in a geopolitically important region for Ankara. For Türkiye, the region is a connectivity linchpin to Europe in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms and almost every security crisis since the First Balkan War of 1912 has led to the influx of the Balkan population into Türkiye. Simultaneously, Turkish elites believe that if Türkiye is to be an

influential player in the Middle East and wider Eurasia, it has to have a stable European rear, with a defensive perimeter and zone of influence in the Balkans.²⁵ Therefore, Türkiye has a genuine interest in having a stake in regional security affairs.

As part of its efforts to build leverage and influence in the Western Balkans, Türkiye has relied on a whole set of instruments. The formation of security partnerships is just the latest stage in the gradual evolution of Ankara's toolkit, where in the past, Ankara first relied on soft power, followed by economic relations, and now security and defence.²⁶ As Turkish political scientist Sencer Gözübenli said back in 2020: "Türkiye entered the region with a soft power approach. However, Turkish decision-makers understood that building a mosque does not represent real political leverage when necessary. Defence cooperation and a country's dependence on Turkey would create a real leverage."²⁷ The new reality in which intelligence and the military have become more prominent players in Turkish policymaking in recent years²⁸ also helps explain the increased use of security partnerships in Ankara's Balkan policy. In recent years, Ankara's foreign policy in the Balkans became much more pragmatic and transactional, with Türkiye moving away from the invocation of Ottoman legacy to the role of a power broker that balances key local ethnic groups.²⁹ In that context, Ankara perceives Serbs and Albanians as the two most consequential ethnic groups in the Balkans due to the fact that they inhabit several countries in the region, motivating Ankara to influence the balance between the two in a way it sees fit at the given moment.³⁰

Post-Ukraine: Building Leverage

In the wake of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, there has been concern that the Balkans can be another potential flashpoint. As a member of NATO, Türkiye was well-positioned to act on the opening and step in as a security provider, boosting its Balkan presence. In June 2023, after Kosovo, Serbs protested the appointment of Albanian mayors in Serbian municipalities in the wake of elections boycotted by the Kosovo Serbs, unrest took place, resulting in numerous injured Hungarian and Italian KFOR peacekeepers. In the aftermath of the unrest, NATO decided to reinforce KFOR with 700 troops. Ankara contributed to this reinforcement with 500 members of Türkiye's 65th mechanised infantry brigade.³¹ In September 2023, these reinforcements were pulled back to Türkiye after the situation was deemed to be stabilised,³² but Türkiye remains one of the big mission contributors. In October 2023, after a clash between Kosovo Police and an armed Serbian group in the village of Banjska, Turkish Major General Özkan Ulutaş assumed the role of Commander of KFOR, becoming the first Turkish commander of KFOR.³³

Ankara has effectively used the altered security environment generated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine to acquire new deals for its weapons industry in the Western Balkans. This dynamic should not be reduced solely to the efforts by the Turkish defence industry to win over new markets. Local nations are in demand for Turkish military hardware. In that context, the interest in Bayraktar TB2 drones in the Western Balkans has been raised by the use of these drones in major international conflicts, including during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war by Azerbaijani forces against Armenian forces and during the initial stages of the Ukraine war by Ukrainian military against Russian troops.³⁴ In February 2023, then Serbian Defence Minister Miloš Vučević said that the Serbian military is analysing the experiences from these two conflicts in deciding on new drone purchases.³⁵ In 2020³⁶ and 2022, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, on behalf of Serbia, expressed interest in the drone for the second time, even referring to an alleged promise made to him by Turkish President Erdoğan in 2022.³⁷

Given that Serbia is the largest drone operator in the Western Balkans, others in the region feel the need to match that capability, and Türkiye is happy to assist.³⁸ Drone delivery to Kosovo demonstrates this reality. Bosnia and Herzegovina is also among the potential buyers of Turkish drones, having flaunted potential interest in them back in 2021.³⁹ The fact that Türkiye is a member of NATO makes it easier for Türkiye to justify its overtures in the Western Balkans by portraying it as part of the wider rubric of Euroatlantic security architecture and to have a degree of coordination with the West. In that context, when supplying weaponry to Balkan countries, Türkiye can justify the fact that its weapons are in accordance with NATO standards, unlike Russian and Chinese weaponry.⁴⁰

While General Ulutaş is acting under NATO auspice and not Ankara's command, one can see how Ankara can still use the appointment to its benefit. In October 2023, when Turkish Defence Minister Yaşar Güler visited Serbia, the dominant issue on the agenda of consultations with his then-Serbian counterpart Miloš Vučević was the issue of KFOR.⁴¹ That same month, Güler also visited Kosovo and discussed security cooperation and KFOR affairs with Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani.⁴² Ankara establishes a presence on the ground with its troops by participating in NATO mechanisms and uses it to open political channels of communication with the involved parties, in this case, the two most important ethnic groups in the region.

After the failed coup in Türkiye in 2016, Ankara's policy of hunting the followers of exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, including in the Balkans and Albanian-populated territories, has strained ties for several with its traditional partners in Albania and Kosovo, prompting an upswing in Serbo-Turkish relations. However, as Erdoğan's political allies in Kosovo are no longer in power, Erdoğan has been working hard to establish a strong link with Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, who has been in power since 2021.⁴³ Ankara cannot ignore the Albanian factor and is willing to provide security assistance, creating a challenge down the road of balancing its ties with the Serbs. It will not be an easy task to maintain a balance between Serbs and Albanians, particularly in regards to Kosovo Albanians. Drone delivery to Kosovo prompted Serbia to give up on purchasing Turkish drones and decided to buy kamikaze drones from the UAE, putting a dent in Serbo-Turkish relations.⁴⁴ This is a potential difficulty for Ankara going forward as Serbia, with its defence industry, has better infrastructure for Türkiye to penetrate new markets than some of Serbia's neighbours.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Türkiye will continue to use every opportunity and every available instrument to boost its influence in the region, and security policy is part of that package. Türkiye would profit from the region's integration into Western institutions. That does not mean that Ankara will always be aligned with the West, but it creates a dual reality in which Ankara will sometimes act as an independent actor and sometimes coordinate with the West. Still, the fact that Ankara's ties with the West are deep and the fact that Ankara is also involved in other regions imposes a limitation on how far it can go in the Western Balkans. The question remains whether Türkiye's security overtures towards the region contribute to stability or instability. That will depend on the Balkan nations and Balkan elites, how they use and leverage Turkish military hardware and their partnership with Türkiye. War remains unlikely in the region, but there are still irresponsible local elites using security partnerships and weapons procurement for political manoeuvring and domestic promotion. In that environment, Ankara will simply be looking for good opportunities. Just like everyone else.

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