



SERBIA AND CHINA – NEW DIMENSION OF COOPERATION

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Over the past few years a perceptible trend of intensified cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and China in the fields of military and civilian security is in evidence, which up to recently had not been the case. That is perhaps the reason why this area of bilateral cooperation between Serbia and China has so far been somewhat less frequently analyzed than the loans, investment, economic and political aspects of these relations. The geopolitical implications of developments in the South China Sea and generally the trend of competition among the great powers, the controversy surrounding the use of the Chinese G5 technology at the global level, on the one hand, and challenges in regulating personal data protection and exchange in Serbia as well as enacting other relevant laws¹ and practices on the other hand, effectively limit the possibility of more precise analysis and forecasts of the future scope of Serbia and China cooperation in the security and defense sphere. Still, CEAS is of the opinion that already in near future and particularly following the possible formalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, shall become the principal aspect of bilateral relations upon which the possibility of Serbia's continued democratization, its EU integration and enhanced cooperation with NATO and the Member States shall crucially depend.

China's importance for Serbia in the areas of defense and security is also reflected in the fact that China is referred to in Serbia's strategic documents, namely in the existing 2009 National Security Strategy in Chapter IV – National Security Policy, subchapter IV.I. Foreign Policy where it is stated that: „The Republic of Serbia will continue to give special attention to the deepening of close ties with the People's Republic of China, India and Brazil, as well as with other traditional partners and important factors of the international community.“ The fact that the Republic of Serbia notes China as a traditional partner in its now outdated National Security Strategy goes hand in hand with Serbia's proclaimed military neutrality back in 2007.

The draft of the new National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia which was published in April 2018, and which by the time of the publication of this article has not been through parliamentary procedure, also refers to China as an essential element of Serbia's strategic environment but also in the context of a state which is of great importance for the preservation of the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia.² This position of Serbia is closely connected with China's position towards non recognition of Kosovo's independence and announcements from Chinese side that they will defend Serbia's territorial integrity with their veto power in the UN Security Council.

¹ Principally the *Personal data protection law* adopted in 2018 and other by-laws which should be adopted to further regulate this subject in different fields i.e. military, internal affairs, security agencies. Cooperation with China in any field, and in particular in security and defense, including for example purchase of CCTV cameras with or without face recognition software, could pose as a threat to personal data protection if there are no adequate regulations.

² National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia. 2009. Available at: http://www.mod.gov.rs/multimedia/file/staticki_sadrzaj/dokumenta/strategije/Strategija%20nacionalne%20bezbednosti%20Republike%20Srbije.pdf

The wave of intensified cooperation between Serbia and China in the areas of military and civilian security began in 2017. In June 2017, the then Minister of Defense of the Republic of Serbia, Zoran Đorđević, received members of a high delegation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army headed by Colonel General Zhao Keshi, Head of Logistics and Supply of the Central Military Commission, which was paying a three-day visit to the Republic of Serbia. On meeting the delegation, Đorđević stated: „China is one of the strategic partners of our country with which we have exceptional political and economic relations. We also recognize the great potential for expanding cooperation in the field of defense and wish to forge firm and long-term bonds in all areas of common interest “.³ Minister Đorđević and Colonel General Keshi agreed to intensify military cooperation in the period ahead through joint training and exercises as well as the development of scientific-technological and military-economic cooperation. Đorđević also added that “... Serbia appreciates China's foreign policy, based on the principles of peaceful problem solving and respect for all factors in international relations, which was also evident in the country's support to the legitimate aims of Serbia to resolve the situation in Kosovo and Metohija in a peaceful way through the diplomatic efforts of our officials.”

In mid-May 2018, Colonel Milan Ranković, Head of the Department for International Military Cooperation of the Defense Policy Sector of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia (MOD) and Senior Colonel Ma Yongbao, Military Attaché of PR China to our country, signed the 2018 Plan of Bilateral Military Cooperation between the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China.⁴ In the Serbian MOD announcement from the meeting in addition to improving military-technical and military-economic cooperation, it was noted that there is a possibility to develop cooperation in other areas, such as military-military, military-medical and military-educational cooperation, as well as other acceptable forms of cooperation. Till the publishing of this article mentioned Bilateral Plan remains unavailable for the public and hasn't been published at any of the government of Serbia institutions registers.

In July 2018, Defense Minister Vulin paid an official visit to the People's Republic of China⁵ during which he visited two Chinese defense industry companies, “AVIC” and “CATIC”, which develop and manufacture aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and anti-aircraft defense systems, as well as the elite 3rd Guard Division of the People's Liberation Army which is responsible for the defense of Beijing. On that occasion Minister Vulin stated: „The skill level and equipment of the Chinese People's Liberation Army is the goal that we have set for ourselves. Our Armies will cooperate in exactly these two areas in the future.... our objective is to ensure that the appropriate assistance so often extended to our armed forces by the Chinese side is adequately used but also to make use of their know-how, training, their instructors, everything that this great, multimillion-strong army is capable of providing to us. “⁶

In mid-September 2018 Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić led a Serbian delegation on an

³ Đorđević: Strengthening cooperation in the field of defense with China. Blic. June 2017. Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/djordjevic-jacanje-saradnje-u-oblasti-odbrane-sa-kinom/j6x1xgh>

⁴ Plan of bilateral military cooperation signed with China. RS Ministry of Defense. May 2018. Available at: <http://www.mod.gov.rs/lat/12615/potpisan-plan-bilateralne-vojne-saradnje-sa-kinom-12615>

⁵ Minister Vulin in Beijing: Serbian Armed Forces catching up with the world. Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia. July 2018. Available at: <http://www.mod.gov.rs/cir/12836/ministar-vulin-u-pekingu-vojska-srbije-hvata-korak-sasvetom-12836>

⁶ Minister Vulin: The skill level and equipment of the Chinese Army is the goal we have set for ourselves. Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia. July 2018. Available at: <http://www.mod.gov.rs/cir/12839/ministar-vulin-obucenost-iopremljenost-kineske-vojske-cilj-koji-i-mi-sebi-postavljam-12839>

official visit to the People's Republic of China.⁷ The media reported that during the visit the procurement was agreed of state-of-the-art drone systems for the Serbian Armed Forces, which would be assembled in Serbia,⁸ while the original components would come from Chinese manufacturers. In question are five sophisticated drone systems, two of which combat drones with laser guided missiles and bombs. The unmanned aerial vehicles have reconnaissance and artillery fire direction capacity. They are also equipped with photo-electronic systems enabling day and night reconnaissance and missile and bomb guidance. Assistant Defense Minister Nenad Miloradović⁹ confirmed that the Ministry of Defense was negotiating the acquisition of unmanned aerial vehicles with several Chinese technological partners, and that the package being negotiated would include the transfer of technology for integrating complex reconnaissance UAVs which the Serbian industry and the Military Technical Institute would be manufacturing for the needs of the Serbian Armed Forces. Miloradović underlined that the unmanned aerial vehicles would have the capacity to reconnoiter targets, determine target coordinates at day and night and laser-guide its missiles and bombs complement. These are two systems of the new generation of unmanned combat aerial vehicles, each system consisting of three drones, a ground control station and a remote video terminal.¹⁰

In October 2018 Serbian Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin had talks with his Chinese counterpart Wei Fenghe on the margins of the International Xiangshan Forum in Beijing. The Ministry of Defense reported that they talked about strengthening cooperation in the field of defense in light of the excellent relations between the presidents of Serbia and China.¹¹ Vulin expressed gratitude for the support that China has been extending to Serbia for many years in respect of the issue of Kosovo and Metohija and underscored the importance of the joint participation of the troops of the two countries in peacekeeping operations under UN command, offering his Chinese counterpart Serbian training centers for multinational operations.

In Brussels, there is an emerging awareness that the flow of Chinese money into Europe has positioned Beijing to shape the Continent's economic landscape and influence its politics.¹² China's deepening involvement in Europe is now registering at multiple levels—financial, technological, telecommunicational, political, and increasingly military—and could soon reorder the foundations of Euro-Atlantic relations.

As NATO celebrated its 70th anniversary in Washington, the impression is gained that insufficient attention was devoted to Chinese acquisitions of critical European infrastructure (especially key ports), which is a compelling security issue. Chinese state-controlled firms now hold stakes in more than ten European ports on the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, from

⁷ Armed Forces acquiring drones from China. Blic. September 2018. Available at: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:749970-POTVRDjENO-PISANjE-NOVOSTI-Vojska-dobija-dronove-iz-Kine>

⁸ Novosti“ article confirmed: Armed Forces acquiring drones from China. Večernje Novosti. September 2018. Available at: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:749970-POTVRDjENO-PISANjE-NOVOSTI-Vojskadobija-dronove-iz-Kine>

⁹ Miloradović: The Ministry of Defence is acquiring UAVs. Blic. September 2018. Available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/miloradovic-ministarstvo-odbrane-nabavlja-bespilotne-letelice/xt2cnx7>

¹⁰ Serbia looks to acquire Chinese drones and the technological know-how. Defense news. September 2018. Available at: <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2018/09/20/serbia-looks-to-acquire-chinese-drones-and-the-technologicalknow-how/>

¹¹ “Excellent Relations Between China and Serbia...”. B92. October 2018. Available at: https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2018&mm=10&dd=26&nav_category=11&nav_id=1461168

¹² Will China Drive a Wedge Between the US and Europe? Author: Andrew Michta. The American Interest. April 2019. Available at: <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/04/22/will-china-drive-a-wedge-between-the-us-and-europe/>

Belgium to Spain to ownership of the Greek port of Piraeus. It should not be forgotten that almost one-tenth of Europe's transport container terminal capacity is under Chinese control.

A given recent expansion of Sino-Serbian military-technical relations could partly be perceived as compensating or countervailing for heightened Russian expectations from bilateral relations with Serbia in these areas, and partly as political decisions with greater internal political than strategic weight. Bearing in mind the sanctions imposed by the US and EU on Russia due to the war in Ukraine, and the US sanctions against persons involved in transactions with the intelligence or defense sectors of the Government of the Russian Federation, articulated in the CAATSA Act, this is not necessarily a bad alternative, but it must be pursued very cautiously. The aggravating circumstance is, naturally, the lack of up-to-date strategic documents in the area of RS defense and security.