

Finabel



# Closing the Capabilities Gap

Perspectives for European  
Defence Cooperation in the Balkans

AN EXPERTISE FORUM CONTRIBUTING TO EUROPEAN  
ARMIES INTEROPERABILITY SINCE 1953



**FINABEL**

European Army Interoperability Centre

Written by  
Ikram Aboutaous, Research team

This Food for Thought paper is a document that gives an initial reflection on the theme. The content is not reflecting the positions of the member states but consists of elements that can initiate and feed the discussions and analyses in the domain of the theme. All our studies are available on [www.finabel.org](http://www.finabel.org)

In recent years, the Western Balkans have seen organisational dynamics which posed new challenges to the definition of regional defence cooperation. The region, still suffering from past and unresolved conflicts, is currently facing major structural disorder. We can see this particularly in the wake of Russia's territorial aggression in Crimea in 2014, which has underlined the Western Balkans' fragile deterrence capabilities and obsolete and non-interoperable organisational infrastructure and equipment.

The current situation calls for a greater sense of accountability and ownership from armed forces in the Western Balkans as a fundamental step to achieve collective defence cooperation and build mutual trust and solidarity between political-military authorities and civil organisations engaged in the region. Defence cooperation in the Balkans led by NATO and the EU through the enlargement of financial instruments shall discourage nationalist rhetoric from avoiding turning inward, especially when external powers have already entered the region through massive investments in key areas of the defence and security sectors.

Therefore, the following study aims to provide a basic understanding of the importance of achieving a collective defence in the Western Balkans and adopting an unconventional deterrent posture as asymmetric threats and the lack of human and financial resources jeopardise interoperable, dynamic, and innovative regional defence mechanisms.



**Mario Blokken**

Director PSec

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>First step: Increase Defence Convergence with the European Union and NATO</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Second step: Foster Deterrence for Improved Readiness and Interoperability</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Third Step: Overcome the Challenges of Stagnant Defence Cooperation</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Fourth Step: Integrate the Balkans into a Wider European Defence Agenda</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Concluding Remarks and the Way Ahead</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>18</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the context of the EU and NATO's eastern enlargement, the need to enhance military cooperation in a post-conflict society like the Balkans has been introduced as a fundamental perspective to ensure peacebuilding and restore security in the region. Despite working towards full NATO and EU memberships in recent years, the defence environment and national shrinking budgets have delayed the Balkans' objective of fulfilling the requirements needed to achieve a collective defence and military cooperation between armed forces.

Regarding the specific dispositions of their national defence industry, social tensions between minorities, unsolved conflicts, and political-economic backlogs, European defence cooperation in the Balkans is not currently on a path of convergence. Nevertheless, the

consequences of their defence capabilities' deterioration have led the Balkan countries to endorse a policy that aims to close the capability gap to develop and enhance military interoperability, foster deterrence and collective defence, and build stability in the region through common mechanisms.

The present paper focuses on the Balkans' capacity-building efforts with the EU and its partner forces through the spectrum of regional initiatives. Recommendations will consider the potential for bolstering strategic cooperation efforts by extending the Balkans' contribution to the European strategic autonomy project and complying with EU and NATO standards, especially in the field of cross-border cooperation and military partnerships.

## **FIRST STEP: INCREASE DEFENCE CONVERGENCE WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION AND NATO**

Since Yugoslavia dissolved in the 1990s, there have been numerous attempts to bolster defence and military cooperation in the Balkans, mainly and primarily through OSCE and NATO on-the-ground presence and interventions in the region. The OSCE

policy tryptic based on the interdependence between politico-military, economic, and human dimensions of security has increased defence convergence in the Balkans.<sup>1</sup> This has been made possible through the progressive – yet complicated – assimilation

1. Dylan Macchiarini Crosson, 2021. "Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans". CEPS. Available at <https://www.ceps.eu/enlarging-the-european-defence-union-to-the-western-balkans/>.

of international and European standards regarding the rule of law, fair and free elections, corruption, human and minority rights, organised crimes, and arms trafficking. Illustrative examples include Albania's 2020 OSCE chairmanship, North Macedonia's 2020 NATO accession, and the forthcoming 2023 OSCE chairmanship. In recent years, three Western Balkan states – Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia – have become NATO members. These countries have since contributed to military operations by hosting NATO bases (e.g. Albania's Kuçova airbase) to strengthen the Alliance capacity to deploy its forces in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and directly contribute to on-the-ground operations, for example, in Afghanistan. Kosovo is also home to a NATO force (KFOR) backed by North Macedonia and Montenegro in an international attempt to support the foundations of the Kosovo Security Forces.<sup>2</sup> However, Republika Srpska and Serbian nationalists are blocking Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership, which prevents the accession negotiations from moving forward despite the country recently engaging in several NATO programmes, such as the Partnership Interoperability Initiative or the Planning and Review Process, which aim to provide forces and capabilities to the Alliance's training, peacekeeping, and crisis-management operations.<sup>3</sup> Euro-

pean partners consider the Balkans' efforts to join the Alliance as a solution to push back or at least discourage Russian – and more recently – Chinese and Turkish politico-military interference in Europe, especially in the Mediterranean area.

The European Union has been trying to slowly integrate Western Balkan states into CSDP missions and operations in the region and beyond: Albania and North Macedonia provided personnel to support the European Union Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR Althea). Serbia has also contributed to EU NAVFOR Atalanta, EUTM Somalia, and EUTM Mali with Montenegro, and EUTM RCA in the Central African Republic with Albania and North Macedonia.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding defence cooperation, contact between Western Balkan states and the EU is relatively limited. Serbia is the only one to have reached an administrative arrangement agreement with the European Defence Agency. Western Balkan states face a significant obstacle despite the interest shown in participating in PESCO and other EU defence and security projects. Third countries must be invited first, and then provide to the common budget.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Western Balkan states are working closely with the EU and other interna-

2. Ibid.

3. NATO. 2021. "Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina". Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49127.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49127.htm?selectedLocale=en)

4. Dylan Macchiarini Crosson. 2021. "Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans". CEPS. Available at <https://www.ceps.eu/enlarging-the-european-defence-union-to-the-western-balkans/>

5. Ian Bond, Luigi Scizzieri, Senem Aydin-Duzgit. 2021. "EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy Co-operation with Neighbours: Mapping diversity". Centre for European Reform. Available at: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2021/eu-foreign-security-and-defence-policy-co-operation>

tional organisations, such as the OSCE and NATO, the current defence and security situation in the region is much less promising with regard to reinforcing enlargement policy recommendations. In this case, political observers have suggested enhancing cooperation between the EU and the OSCE since the OSCE has more expertise in the Balkan area in terms of politico-military, economic, and human dimensions. Therefore, cooperation with the EU could and should be based on additional financial and human resources, mainly through EU pre-accession funds intended to support political and economic development in the enlargement countries. Funds should also be extended in defence matters to pursue the OSCE reforms and avoid stagnation and fatigue policy amongst the Balkans' public opinion and decision-makers.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, defence convergence with the European Union should be at the core of EU integration and enlargement policies in the Balkans. Consequently, European partners should consider a complete integration of Balkan states with the project of a European Defence Union and extend their participation in projects other than in CSDP missions.<sup>7</sup> New rules on defence convergence should consider extending third-country participant status to Western Balkans countries within PESCO and the European Defence Fund.<sup>8</sup>

The emergence of industrial and technological cooperation in European defence under the EDF should consider candidates for EU membership and third countries to improve capabilities and close the gap between the armed forces and defence industries. The EDA should extend administrative arrangements to new Balkan countries to foster strategic cooperation, joint procurement, and industrial interdependence.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, EU membership could significantly restore peace in the region by increasing security and defence convergence between the Balkans and the rest of Europe. It could also provide candidate countries with a sense of agency by allowing them to participate in the EU defence decision-making process and automatically engage in CSDP missions, which promote mutual defence and solidarity between allies.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, defence convergence between the Balkans and the rest of Europe relies on whether or not candidate countries remain engaged in the EU accession process and if they intend to stay politically aligned with the EU's Common Foreign and Defence Policy.<sup>11</sup> Currently, the major risks to defence convergence include enlargement fatigue and a loss of interest in the European defence project since new military powers, such as China

6. Dylan Macchiarini Crosson. 2021. "Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans". CEPS. Available at <https://www.ceps.eu/enlarging-the-european-defence-union-to-the-western-balkans/>.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ian Bond, Luigi Scazzieri, Senem Aydin-Duzgit. 2021. "EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy Co-operation with Neighbours: Mapping diversity". Centre for European Reform. Available at: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2021/eu-foreign-security-and-defence-policy-co-operation>

and Turkey, have recently entered the Balkans through public and private investments, mainly in the security sector. Thus, achieving

European defence integration and its promise for stability seems unlikely for the foreseeable future.

## **SECOND STEP: FOSTER DETERRENCE FOR IMPROVED READINESS AND INTEROPERABILITY**

In recent years, the Balkan missions and operations have uncovered the consequences of European shortfalls in equipment and organisation, especially in the eastern flank of the continent where non-interoperable and out-of-date Soviet equipment undermine armed forces mobility and deterrence capabilities. This has been mainly observed in the C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) domain during Balkan deployments, which unveiled severe backlogs in terms of communication systems, data information, sensors for surveillance and reconnaissance, logistical mobility, and personnel development.<sup>12</sup>

As a consequence of the illegal Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Europeans started to consider fostering deterrence in the eastern flank as a major step to improve readiness and interoperability in an effort to close – or at least improve – the capability gap in the Balkan region. In an era of hybrid threats, and in the Balkan states' case, deterrence requires

other means, including strengthening the resilience of communication and logistical systems and reinforcing a sense of accountability through armed forces' multinational training and simulation.

Following a 2018 conference held in Sofia, Bulgaria by the NATO Public Diplomacy Division on the defence and deterrence posture of NATO and the EU in Eastern Europe, the urgent need to develop the Bucharest Initiative (B9) in the Black Sea – and particularly in the Western Balkans region – was addressed.<sup>13</sup> This initiative would be based on a programme for readiness and interoperability dedicated to the region's development of defence cooperation in education and training to foster deterrence capabilities and build a common strategy to tackle hybrid threats.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, it has been proposed for the defined region to elaborate a specific strategy targeted at enhancing defence cooperation and, more particularly, deterrence capacities. This strategy is based on the conduct of multinational armed forces projects as well as stan-

12. Gordon Adams, Guy Ben-Ari, John Logsdon and Ray Williamson. 2004. "Bridging the Gap: European C4ISR Capabilities and Transatlantic Interoperability". National Defense University Center for Technology and National Security Policy. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235164113\\_Bridging\\_the\\_Gap\\_European\\_C4ISR\\_Capabilities\\_and\\_Transatlantic\\_Interoperability](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235164113_Bridging_the_Gap_European_C4ISR_Capabilities_and_Transatlantic_Interoperability).

13. Velizar Shalamanov, Pavel Anastasov, and Georgi Tsvetkov. 2019. "Deterrence and Defense at the Eastern Flank of NATO and the EU: Readiness and Interoperability in the Context of Forward Presence". Connections 18 (1/2): 25–42. Available at [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26948847?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26948847?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

14. Ibid.



dard education, training, and simulation in the area of C4ISR and aims at defining warfighting and crisis management concepts.<sup>15</sup>

The redefined strategy for European defence cooperation in the Balkans comes into action at the Wales Summit in 2014 when the Readiness Action Plan from NATO was implemented to restore and maintain security in Europe's eastern flank in the context of hybrid threats and Russia's territorial aggression in Ukraine – a European Union priority partner. This initiative aims to provide the Alliance with 30 major naval combatants, 30 heavy or medium manoeuvre battalions, and 30 kinetic air squadrons with enabling forces at 30 days' readiness. NATO representatives defend the Readiness Initiative as a dynamic and promising measure designed to build a collective, deterrent, and high-intensity defence cooperation based on deploying a rapid military response and effective interoperability in joint operations.<sup>16</sup>

A regional initiative, such as the Bucharest (B9+), has strong potential to improve defence cooperation in Central and South-eastern Europe, emphasising the Western Balkan and the Black Sea regions. To ensure the proper handling of this initiative, three conditions aim to close the gaps and expand military capabilities: (i) develop early warning systems to improve armed forces' response time, (ii) restore and enhance national forces' capabilities

in engaging swiftly and rapidly in a multinational context, (iii) boost military mobility through funding and modernisation of logistical infrastructure to achieve a rapid movement of goods and personnel.<sup>17</sup>

European defence cooperation in the Balkans relies on whether the EU and NATO are willing to synchronise fully and agree on a defined common action plan. The European Union should be able to complement NATO's tools and on-the-ground expertise through its defence and security mechanisms, such as PESCO, CSDP, Frontex, EDF, and EU delegations in the defined region, in an effort to provide a solid and credible defence capability plan in the Balkans. Credibility is, in this case, the operative word, meaning that there is an urgent need to provide European armed forces, especially in the Central and South-eastern parts of the continent, with a credible and innovative deterrent action plan coordinated between the EU and NATO. This would include complying with equal standards, cross-border cooperation through exercises and training, and, ultimately, a permanent stationing with land, air, and maritime presence on the Adriatic, Mediterranean and Black seas.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the strategic location of the Balkan states makes it relevant to include them in the European defence union in the form of a "military Schengen zone" through standardising regulations, sharing best practices with common

---

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

and regular exercises, harmonising standards and procedures (especially in the cross-border field), and modernising a dual-use infrastructure aimed at reducing deficiencies in military requirements.<sup>19</sup>

Regional initiatives are of great importance and can play a critical role in the success of European defence cooperation in the Balkans. The Bucharest B9+ initiative identifies three Western Balkan countries as a priority of the EU and NATO's eastern flank deterrence policy: Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. These three are followed by central and east nation allies: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and the three Baltic states Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.<sup>20</sup> The programme's next step will be to move towards full membership for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo.<sup>21</sup> The credibility of the B9+ initiative relies on identifying NATO and EU force structures in Eastern Europe. In this context, the potential for public-private synergies is to be considered in investment decisions to provide the B9+ nations with harmonised and innovative tools available to all participants in the event of multinational deployments where armed forces fully maximise C4ISR capabilities. Therefore, the B9+ initiative can be considered as a promising readiness and interoperability programme in the Balkans and its neighbourhood as it would enhance and

promote the military cooperation of leading battle groups between non-EU/NATO and EU/NATO members in a collaborative effort to build and sustain common defence mechanisms in the defined region.

In the same vein, regional programmes in the Balkans should put education and training at the core of their defence cooperation, right before joint procurements and industries synergies aspects of their military rapprochement. The efficiency of readiness and interoperability programmes relies on the human dimension and less – to a certain extent – on procurements and equipment.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the Balkans, it is now the right time to consider developing a formal multinational formation programme as a major instrument to foster defence cooperation through regular exercises, training, and simulation to break down prejudices between people still scarred by years of conflicts and awaken the sense of solidarity and accountability required to build sustainable defence cooperation in a region suffering from numerous hardships.

There is an urgent need to consolidate the existing multinational formation structures and establish an action plan to develop them further in the Balkans and South-eastern Europe. The EU and NATO will be required to fully synchronise to achieve equal standards in C4ISR projects through common and regu-

19. Ikram Aboutaous, Gabriele Ghio and Isabella Stuerzer, under the supervision of Mario Blokken. 2021. "Interoperability and Military Mobility: An Assessment of the Functionality of Europe's Logistical Infrastructure". Finabel – European Army Interoperability Centre. Available at: <https://finabel.org/interoperability-and-military-mobility-an-assessment-of-the-functionality-of-europes-logistical-infrastructure/>

20. Velizar Shalamanov, Pavel Anastasov, and Georgi Tsvetkov. 2019. "Deterrence and Defense at the Eastern Flank of NATO and the EU: Readiness and Interoperability in the Context of Forward Presence." *Connections* 18 (1/2): 25–42. Available at [https://www.jstor.org/stable/76948847?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/76948847?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

lar training on readiness and interoperability. Working closely with the three Western Balkan states identified by the B9+ initiative – Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia – will be decisive in European defence cooperation. Further research and administrative

agreements will be essential to accelerate and increase regional cooperation between the EU and NATO through maintenance and modernisation of equipment, a technology and education roadmap, and permanent stationing in the region.

### **THIRD STEP: OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES OF STAGNANT DEFENCE COOPERATION**

Numerous attempts have been made to encourage defence cooperation initiatives and accelerate democratic reforms in the Balkans in recent years. Although regional and international efforts do exist, cooperation remains stagnant. A lack of resources and disagreements over political and economic interests are the leading causes hindering progress in building sustainable defence cooperation.

Since Yugoslavia dissolved in the 1990s, defence ministers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the US have been meeting together at the South-Eastern European Defence Ministerial Coordination Committee, held annually to promote Euro-Atlantic relations based on military cooperation in humanitarian and peacekeeping operations with participating international organisations.<sup>23</sup> Later, Alba-

nia, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, North Macedonia, Romania, and Turkey, known collectively as the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG), established an Agreement on the Multinational Peace Force South-Eastern Europe. Armed forces from participating countries were then involved in operations and missions led by NATO, the UN, and the OSCE in the defined region and beyond. Forces were mainly deployed for humanitarian missions and conflict prevention and resolution operations. An emblematic example of this is SEEBRIG's participation from February to August 2006 in NATO operations in Afghanistan. However, SEEBRIG's involvement was limited to training without direct contribution to operations, which, according to some observers, reassessed the existence and efficiency of such enterprise.<sup>24</sup>

In 2007, the annual Conference of the Chiefs of Defence/General Staffs of the

23. Natalia Bekiarova and Marin Petkov. 2018. "Opportunities for Development of Defense Cooperation between Southeastern European Countries". SSRN Electronic Journal. 4. 39-51. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380\\_Opportunities\\_for\\_Development\\_of\\_Defense\\_Cooperation\\_Between\\_Southeastern\\_European\\_Countries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380_Opportunities_for_Development_of_Defense_Cooperation_Between_Southeastern_European_Countries)

24. Ibid.

Balkan countries on military cooperation (known as the Balkan CHOD Forum) was established and aimed to reunite the Chiefs of Defence of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey. The main objective of such an initiative is to improve relations between decision-makers and tackle defence and security challenges together, particularly addressing the military's response to hybrid threats. The annual Conference sets up three working groups dedicated to coordinating common work, asymmetric threats, training, and military exercises to gain insights from different military authorities.<sup>25</sup> Carrying out such an ambitious initiative brings together military decision-makers every year and creates an official regional platform aimed at addressing specific defence and security challenges as well as seeking common ground on new mechanisms for cooperation in the Balkans.<sup>26</sup> During the last Balkan CHOD Forum held in June 2021 in Sarajevo, the Chief of the Joint Staff of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lieutenant General Senad Mašović, reaffirmed the importance of developing common defence mechanisms for cooperation in the Balkan states: "It is important to ensure better mutual understanding to achieve the required level of interoperability and knowledge necessary for joint engagement,

timely exchange of information and training capacities, as well as mutual assistance".<sup>27</sup> The highest priority for defence cooperation in the Balkans lies in (i) improving the model of military cooperation, (ii) strengthening existing initiatives, and (iii) developing innovative and interoperable mechanisms.

Despite a growing number of ambitious regional initiatives and projects targeted at building and fostering stability and defence cooperation in the Balkans, it has become evident that, so far, collective efforts have not borne fruit. The cyclical recurrence of stagnating defence policy reforms in the Balkans has become ingrained due to years of a limited set of technical and innovative formats for cooperation and growing enlargement fatigue amongst a public divided over political and economic disagreements. Duplicating initiatives and projects in different shapes and forms have contributed to lowering their global efficiency, questioning their existence, and creating further instability in the region.<sup>28</sup> It appears that the growing number of projects and cooperation initiatives is not enough – there has been no significant improvement in defence capabilities in the defined area. This has been partly explained by the fact that policy fatigue has reached some Balkan countries, especially Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Romania,

25. Ibid.

26. Balkan Countries CHODs Forum. 2021. "14th Conference of the Chiefs of Defense/General Staffs of the Balkan's countries on military cooperation – Balkan CHOD Forum". Available at: <http://www.balkanchoforum.net/news/14th-conference-chiefs-defense-general-staffs-balkan-countries-military-cooperation-balkan-cho>

27. Ibid.

28. Natalia Bekiarova and Marin Petkov. 2018. "Opportunities for Development of Defense Cooperation between Southeastern European Countries". SSRN Electronic Journal. 4. 39-51. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380\\_Opportunities\\_for\\_Development\\_of\\_Defense\\_Cooperation\\_Between\\_Southeastern\\_European\\_Countries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380_Opportunities_for_Development_of_Defense_Cooperation_Between_Southeastern_European_Countries)

that recently joined NATO and/or the EU. Despite general exhaustion, there is an imperative need for policy action and enhanced interaction between decision-makers who must combine efforts to cultivate regional partnerships based on joint procurements and multinational training and education.<sup>29</sup> Partnerships have multiple benefits that are essential for fostering deterrence and defence capabilities: they consolidate procurement and acquisition, benefit from economies of scale and reduce logistics footprint (e.g. funding and development of dual-use infrastructures), and enhance military capabilities through the sharing of best practices and regular and common multinational training.

As concluded at the 2021 Balkan CHOD Forum, the main challenge for a defence rapprochement between the Balkan countries currently lies in improving mechanisms for cooperation through an audit of existing regional arrangements and the identification of duplicate initiatives and projects. Regional initiatives such as the B9+ and the South-eastern Europe Defence Cooperation (SEDEF-CO)/Balkan CHOD Forum are vital in implementing credible and sustainable defence cooperation in the region. However, representatives of participant countries should strive for cohesion between the different authorities engaged in the Balkans' defence cooperation project. Their main objective should be centred around creating a shared body aimed

at closing the gaps and improving cooperation through innovative and interoperable mechanisms that meet the standards of EU and NATO's readiness and interoperability programmes. To this end, effective, sustainable, and non-duplicable defence cooperation between the Balkan countries should be based on the following principles in order to achieve concrete changes: (i) creating a single body that promotes innovative mechanisms with a transparent funding policy and attainable objectives based on national priorities, (ii) enhancing civil-military cooperation through involving civil society organisations in the consultation and possibly in the decision-making process, (iii) working towards complete transparency and pragmatism amongst participating authorities in the name of mutual solidarity between neighbours and allies.

In addition to the absence of a single regional format of cooperation, the stagnating state of the defence rapprochement between the Balkan states also originates from the lethargic EU enlargement process in the region and lack of human/economic resources to tackle asymmetric threats. In the general context of budget cuts and the US's gradual financial disengagement in European military capabilities, there is an imperative need for the Balkans to invest in state-of-the-art technologies and train its defence personnel to face the current hybrid threats and challenges. Since the battlefield and warfare have been redefined,

---

29. Ibid.

it has become clear that procurement and acquisition should be based not only on the actual equipment, such as armoured vehicles or aircraft but also on asymmetric/hybrid materiel by shifting to unconventional strategies on proactive and preventive approaches. For this to happen, collective effort is mandatory considering the current state of the Balkans' national defence industries.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, defence cooperation in the framework of EU enlargement is not likely to be achieved in the near future, mainly because of the consequences of recent episodes in European external policy, including Brexit, extraordinary migratory flows, rising nationalism inside and outside of the Union, and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic – all of which delay accession negotiations and the implementation of strategic reforms in the area of defence and security.<sup>31</sup>

Recent discouraging statements made by European and Balkan leaders suggest that EU-led defence cooperation in the region will be slow to emerge in the foreseeable future, thus urging candidate countries to commit to the collective effort and synchronise their defence capabilities to build innovative and sustainable regional mechanisms dedicated to addressing asymmetric risks and challenges.<sup>32</sup>

Considering that organised crime, paramilitary, ultra-nationalist, and terrorist groups may

infiltrate the region, Balkan decision-makers should actively examine new forms of regional defence cooperation. For this to happen, existing formats of cooperation should be reviewed to prevent duplication and build a more comprehensive approach based on the specific dispositions of each participant's defence industries and national interests. New mechanisms should support national strategic autonomy at the operational level while seeking a more proactive approach in enhancing military capabilities through joint funding and training.<sup>33</sup> Yet, defence cooperation is still not moving towards a simplification of procedures and initiatives. It is no secret that defence convergence needs political and economic reforms to be implemented quickly. However, technical talks on setting up cooperation are lagging, which penalises citizens who may otherwise benefit from implementing and modernising dual-use/civil-military facilities to close regional infrastructure gaps and clear logistical bottlenecks in the region.<sup>34</sup> In practice, the effectiveness of a defence coalition in achieving full cooperation remains relatively limited in a divided society still healing from past conflicts. Therefore, the willingness to cooperate on a political level and understanding and to respect one's interests will be decisive in the emergence of defence cooperation solely based on peace, security, and solidarity.<sup>35</sup> In this context and in order to prevent the escalation of communal conflict and

---

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

deterioration of current political crises, like in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, Balkan decision-makers must settle on a single and common defence coalition format and increase multinational interaction and initiatives in a bid to foster solidarity and mutual respect between peoples.

The current state of defence and security vulnerability of the Balkan countries has aroused the interest of geopolitical and military powers, including Russia, Turkey, and more recently, China. On one side, Russia has been flirting with the Balkans' vulnerabilities, especially in the eastern flank after the illegal territorial aggression of Crimea in 2014 and is now vigorously spreading its influence amongst Slavic and Christian groups in Serbia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. On the other side, Turkey, which adopted a more deterrent

and assertive military posture in the framework of its foreign policy after the 2016 coup attempt, is now increasing its presence in the Balkans amongst a population of Muslim descent in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia following a neo-ottoman vision.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Russia and Turkey, China's ambitions in the Balkans lie in economic reasons and are attributable to bolstering trade relations in Europe considering the proximity between the Balkans and the EU's single market. This leads Chinese authorities to invest in logistical and infrastructure projects in key sectors, including energy and security in Montenegro, Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, multiple external geopolitical and military powers besides the EU and NATO creates even more instability and makes defence cooperation in the Balkans an idea not likely to be put into practice in the foreseeable future.<sup>38</sup>

## **FOURTH STEP: INTEGRATE THE BALKANS INTO A WIDER EUROPEAN DEFENCE AGENDA**

Considering the numerous internal and external challenges that the Balkan countries face in forming a single and clear regional defence cooperation, it appears that extending the Balkans' contribution to European strategic

autonomy and the EU's defence plan is somehow the most adequate and relevant response to promoting a defence rapprochement and enhancement of military capabilities, especially when external powers are interfering in

36. Ibid.

37. Stephanie Fenkart. 2021. "China's Influence in the Western Balkans: Partnership or Confrontation?". International Institute for Piece. Available at: <https://www.iipvienna.com/new-blog/2021/9/21/chinas-influence-in-the-western-balkans-partnership-or-confrontation>

38. Natalia Bekiarova and Marin Perkov. 2018. "Opportunities for Development of Defense Cooperation between Southeastern European Countries". SSRN Electronic Journal. 4. 39-51. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380\\_Opportunities\\_for\\_Development\\_of\\_Defense\\_Cooperation\\_Between\\_Southeastern\\_European\\_Countries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380_Opportunities_for_Development_of_Defense_Cooperation_Between_Southeastern_European_Countries)

European affairs directly from European soil through public and private investments in key sectors such as energy, security and transports.<sup>39</sup>

European strategic power was certainly undermined after the Kosovo war at the end of the 1990s and the country's independence in 2008. These events resulted in questioning the relevance of the European project as an anti-war initiative based on the promise that war would not happen again on the continent. The political and military defeats also resulted in fragmentation inside the European Union between the Member States that do, don't, and won't recognise Kosovo as an independent state. Furthermore, US interventions – in the context of the Yugoslav and Kosovo wars – demonstrated their crisis management capacities as they were primarily engaged in the resolution process, whereas Europeans were lagging with no clear leadership or common defence strategy. This resulted in NATO taking the lead in resolution and peacebuilding/peacekeeping operations and allowing a permanent stationing of the US Army in Europe.<sup>40</sup>

The challenge of the European Union's objective of strategic autonomy is to require the effective contribution of Balkan forces and integrate the South-eastern neighbourhood into a more comprehensive European defence

agenda. Including them surely means tackling the numerous hardships they encounter and strengthening the existing policy framework implemented since the first years of EU/NATO/OSCE/UN on-the-ground cooperation. Furthermore, to avoid another Turkish scenario of lethargic and endless negotiations, Europeans must consider the Balkans as a priority area subject to similar security and defence threats and challenges. Plus, by allowing their contribution – all at once –, the EU will come out ahead and reinforce its strategic posture and relevance towards extra-European powers, including the US, Russia, and China.<sup>41</sup> As defended by several observers, the strategic importance of the Balkans shall be recognised as a fundamental asset in the European strategic autonomy dossier. Balkan contribution is not only about accession, but it goes beyond, especially since strategic autonomy was conceived as a solution to achieve greater integration and harmonisation in defence capabilities in a period where Europe and the Balkans are facing similar risks and threats such as ultra-nationalism, terrorism, and rejection of multilateralism.<sup>42</sup> Given the gradual American disengagement in Europe after Donald Trump's statements on NATO and the alleged asymmetrical contribution to the Alliance's budget compared to other participants, the EU vested interests in including the Balkans in its defence union project. Now is the time to remodel existing defence mech-

39. Ometa Barbullushi. 2021. "The Western Balkans as strategic vulnerability of the EU" in *In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans?* Istituto Affari Internazionali. 13-17. Available at: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893682008.pdf>

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Marie Jelenka Kirchner and Zoran Nechev. 2020. "The EU's strategic interest in the Western Balkans: Stimulating EU's strategic autonomy through cross-border cooperation". Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje. No. 54/2020. 76-54. Available at: [https://idcs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/finalB5\\_TTF\\_EDITED\\_VOLUMEENG.pdf](https://idcs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/finalB5_TTF_EDITED_VOLUMEENG.pdf)



anisms and establish effective and innovative formats to decrease European vulnerabilities

in defence capabilities.<sup>43</sup>

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS AND THE WAY AHEAD**

Through a series of recommendations for improving upon common challenges and identifying possible actions to take to foster defence cooperation in the Balkans, the present paper draws the following conclusion: it appears that the Balkans constitute a strategic vulnerability for the European Union. Defence stagnation in the defined region originates from years of lethargic reforms in political, economic, and social areas and a lack of interaction between neighbours still scarred from past conflicts. Furthermore, it is no secret that new global players – including Russia and China – have entered the Balkans through public and private investments in key sectors such as energy, security, and transport, thus making the EU appear weak since accession negotiations have been delayed, causing decreased trust and dialogue between Brussels and the Balkans. Due to the region's many hardships, regional defence cooperation must happen before integrating into the European bloc. Accordingly, Balkan decision-makers should adopt a more pragmatic and flexible posture with the objective of enhancing their military capabilities and closing the gaps between the EU and the

Balkan region as a whole. A policy to close the capability gap would be based on the following:

Seek political decisions and key military partnerships to bolster interaction and mutual trust at the regional level and between Armed forces

Audit existing defence mechanisms to avoid unnecessary duplication

Create a single and clear defence platform

Enhance military mobility through investments in dual-use infrastructure in a bid to close socio-economic gaps between regions

Commit to the defence sector at the national and European levels, including financially through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the Multiannual Financial Framework

Ultimately, in the framework of strategic autonomy, the European Union must integrate the Balkans beyond the enlargement process and take an active role in improving defence capabilities in the region through funding and implementing interoperable, dynamic, and innovative mechanisms.

---

43. Ibid.

## REFERENCES

Balkan Countries CHODs Forum. 2021. “14th Conference of the Chiefs of Defense/General Staffs of the Balkan’s countries on military cooperation – Balkan CHOD Forum”. Available at: <http://www.balkanchodforum.net/news/14th-conference-chiefs-defensegeneral-staffs-balkans-countries-military-cooperation-balkan-chod>

Dylan Macchiarini Crosson. 2021. “Enlarging the European Defence Union to the Western Balkans”. CEPS. Available at <https://www.ceps.eu/enlarging-the-european-defence-union-to-the-western-balkans/>

Gordon Adams, Guy Ben-Ari, John Logsdon and Ray Williamson. 2004. “Bridging the Gap: European C4ISR Capabilities and Transatlantic Interoperability”. National Defense University Center for Technology and National Security Policy. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235164113\\_Bridging\\_the\\_Gap\\_European\\_C4ISR\\_Capabilities\\_and\\_Transatlantic\\_Interoperability](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235164113_Bridging_the_Gap_European_C4ISR_Capabilities_and_Transatlantic_Interoperability)

Ian Bond, Luigi Scazzieri and Senem Aydin-Duzgit. 2021. “EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy Co-operation with Neighbours: Mapping diversity”. Centre for European Reform. Available at: <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2021/eu-foreign-security-and-defence-policy-co-operation>

Ikram Aboutaous, Gabriele Ghio and Isabella Stuerzer, under the supervision of Mario Blokken. 2021. “Interoperability and Military Mobility: An Assessment of the Functionality of Europe’s Logistical Infrastructure”. Finabel – European Army Interoperability Centre. Available at: <https://finabel.org/interoperability-and-military-mobility-an-assessment-of-the-functionality-of-europes-logistical-infrastructure/>

Marie Jelenka Kirchner and Zoran Nechev. 2020. “The EU’s strategic interest in the Western Balkans: Stimulating EU’s strategic autonomy through cross-border cooperation”. Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” – Skopje. No. 54/2020. 76-54. Available at: [https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/finalB5\\_TTF\\_EDITED\\_VOLUMEENG.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/finalB5_TTF_EDITED_VOLUMEENG.pdf)

Natalia Bekiarova and Marin Petkov. 2018. “Opportunities for Development of Defense Cooperation between Southeastern European Countries”. SSRN Electronic Journal. 4. 39-51. Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380\\_Opportunities\\_for\\_Development\\_of\\_Defense\\_Cooperation\\_Between\\_Southeastern\\_European\\_Countries](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328718380_Opportunities_for_Development_of_Defense_Cooperation_Between_Southeastern_European_Countries)

NATO. 2021. “Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49127.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49127.htm?selectedLocale=en)

Odetta Barbullushi. 2021. “The Western Balkans as strategic vulnerability of the EU” in In Search of EU Strategic Autonomy: What Role for the Western Balkans? Istituto Affari Internazionali. 13-17. Available at: <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893682008.pdf>

Stephanie Fenkart. 2021. “China’s Influence in the Western Balkans: Partnership or Confrontation?”. International Institute for Peace. Available at: <https://www.iipvienna.com/new-blog/2021/9/21/chinas-influence-in-the-western-balkans-partnership-or-confrontation>

Velizar Shalamanov, Pavel Anastasov, and Georgi Tsvetkov. 2019. “Deterrence and Defense at the Eastern Flank of NATO and the EU: Readiness and Interoperability in the Context of Forward Presence.” Connections 18 (1/2): 25–42. Available at [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26948847?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26948847?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

Created in 1953, the Finabel committee is the oldest military organisation for cooperation between European Armies: it was conceived as a forum for reflections, exchange studies, and proposals on common interest topics for the future of its members. Finabel, the only organisation at this level, strives at:

- Promoting interoperability and cooperation of armies, while seeking to bring together concepts, doctrines and procedures;
- Contributing to a common European understanding of land defence issues. Finabel focuses on doctrines, trainings, and the joint environment.

Finabel aims to be a multinational-, independent-, and apolitical actor for the European Armies of the EU Member States. The Finabel informal forum is based on consensus and equality of member states. Finabel favours fruitful contact among member states' officers and Chiefs of Staff in a spirit of open and mutual understanding via annual meetings.

Finabel contributes to reinforce interoperability among its member states in the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the EU, and *ad hoc* coalition; Finabel neither competes nor duplicates NATO or EU military structures but contributes to these organisations in its unique way. Initially focused on cooperation in armament's programmes, Finabel quickly shifted to the harmonisation of land doctrines. Consequently, before hoping to reach a shared capability approach and common equipment, a shared vision of force-engagement on the terrain should be obtained.

In the current setting, Finabel allows its member states to form Expert Task Groups for situations that require short-term solutions. In addition, Finabel is also a think tank that elaborates on current events concerning the operations of the land forces and provides comments by creating "Food for Thought papers" to address the topics. Finabel studies and Food for Thoughts are recommendations freely applied by its member, whose aim is to facilitate interoperability and improve the daily tasks of preparation, training, exercises, and engagement.



Tel: +32 (0)2 441 79 05 – GSM: +32 (0)483 712 193  
E-mail: [info@finabel.org](mailto:info@finabel.org)

You will find our studies at [www.finabel.org](http://www.finabel.org)



European Army Interoperability Centre



[www.linkedin.com/in/finabelEAIC](http://www.linkedin.com/in/finabelEAIC)



[@FinabelEAIC](https://www.facebook.com/FinabelEAIC)



[@FinabelEAIC](https://twitter.com/FinabelEAIC)