

NATO's Drive Towards the South. The Balkans and South Eastern Europe

“Drang Nach Suden”

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(This posting is a select chapter from Andrew Korybko's second book that will focus on the geopolitical application of [Hybrid Wars](#).)

Southern Expansionism

During the final years of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the US reached a [verbal agreement](#) whereby Moscow would allow for the reunification of Germany in exchange for the US agreeing to never expand NATO further East. As history attests, the US shamelessly reneged on its guarantee the moment the Soviet Union collapsed and was powerless to effectively stop it, swallowing up almost the entirety of Eastern Europe (save for Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine) and all the Baltic States by 2004. What's less studied by observers is NATO's “*Drang Nach Suden*” (Drive to the South), which represents one of the last fronts of continental NATO expansionism and has been in the works ever since the end of the Cold War.

Theoretically speaking, this corner of Europe didn't fall under the Soviets' purvey when they made their verbal agreement with the US. Moscow didn't have any forces stationed in Yugoslavia or Albania that would soon be withdrawn, thus making these countries' prospective membership into NATO a moot point for Moscow to even discuss because it had no power or influence one way or another to even decide on it. Faced with its own internal problems and its forthcoming theater-wide withdraw from Central and Eastern Europe, it's likely that the Soviet Union didn't even consider the then-unthinkable scenario that a series of American-engineered proto-Hybrid Wars would soon lead to the dissolution of Yugoslavia along federative lines and one day see two of its formerly unified members plus Albania under the NATO nuclear umbrella.

Alas, that's exactly what happened, and it can be suggested that one of the US' partial motivations for dismembering Yugoslavia was to create a chain of weakened nation-states that would be much easier to absorb into the bloc than the formerly unified and strong federal entity. It was earlier discussed at the beginning of the book's Balkan research that Slovenia was the most gung-ho pro-Western state out of the entire former Yugoslavia, being the first to join both the EU and NATO. To remind the reader of what was written at that earlier point, Slovenia was largely insulated from the chaos of the Yugoslav Wars owing to its advantageous geography, and its small population was disproportionately well endowed with a legacy of Yugoslav investment that allowed it to rapidly achieve the highest GDP per capita of all the former communist countries in Europe.



Consequently, it joined NATO and the EU in 2004, making it the first Balkan state with membership in both organizations. This was designed to serve as an example-setting precedent for other similarly pro-Western regional elite who wanted to emulate the “Slovenian success story”, leading them to believe that it was Ljubljana’s impassioned desire to join Western-dominated institutions that explained its success and not its inimitable geographic, historic, and economic factors. Be that as it was, the deceptive ploy prevailed in convincing the Croatian elite of their own self-delusions and consequently in furthering their informational investments in misleading the rest of the population into supporting their predetermined decision to join both blocs. Zagreb would later enter into NATO in 2009 and join the EU in 2013, thus following the Slovenian scenario and dispensing of the tiny Balkan country’s strategic purpose to either organization (hence the institutional neglect that it’s received from both since then).

The situation was a bit different with Albania, as it wasn’t influenced by Slovenia’s example at all. It joined NATO the same year that Croatia did for the complementary reasons of supporting the US’ Lead From Behind grand strategy in the Western Balkans and in placing itself in a more ‘regionally intimidating’ position for promoting Greater Albania sometime again in the future (most likely against Macedonia). Also, it can’t be discounted that Tirana’s elites were motivated to a large degree by their conception of ‘triumphalism’ in formally allying with the bloc that bombarded Serbia and led to the temporary severing of its Province of Kosovo. Taking into account the Albanian understanding of ‘pride’ and how the Ottoman-era culture of completely disrespecting one’s enemy are still influential factors that impact on the Albanian psyche, it’s very likely that one of the country’s driving interests in joining NATO was simply to spite Serbia.

Waiting In The Wings?

Looking at the rest of the Balkans, every country has some form or another of institutional relations with NATO.

Serbia:

To begin with, Serbia agreed to an [Individual Partnership Action Plan](#) in January 2015, in an event that bizarrely received barely any publicity in the country’s media. One would have been led to believe that Serbia’s closer relations with the same military bloc that bombed it into submission 16 years prior would garner intense outcry among the country’s opinion leaders and institutions, but the fact that it didn’t speaks loudly about the strong entrenchment of influential pro-Western figures inside the country’s establishment.



Cooperation with NATO is generally rejected by the majority of Serbs, who survived NATO bombings in 1999.

This political predicament is inherently untenable and cannot progress for much longer without the country being thrown into domestic destabilization. Pragmatic approaches towards multiple geopolitical directions are welcome for any country, but when radical moves such as deepening the relationship with NATO are made, it indicates a decisive

power play on behalf of the pro-Western forces. Couple that early-2015 announcement with the news at the end of the year in December that Belgrade is [formally in accession talks](#) with Brussels, and 2015 becomes the 'Year of the West' for Serbia. This can't help but result in opposition from the pragmatic voices represented by Nikolic (who is reflective of the majority of society), which must feel their influence waning amidst Vucic's pro-Western advancements. Also, it's notable that this decision was undertaken under the Vucic's Premiership, which has gone to great lengths to please the West. This stands in stark contrast to the contemporaneous Nikolic Presidency, which has worked hard to make pragmatic strides in Serbia's relations with Russia. The glaring discrepancy between the foreign policy priorities of the Prime Minister and the President doesn't seem to be an elaborate 'balancing' ruse between the West and Russia, but rather a clumsy and disjointed struggle to hash out compromise between the respective Serbian elites that each figurehead represents.

The governmental split that's being produced by Vucic's unwavering pro-Western institutional course (continued despite his visit to Moscow and appeal for Russian weaponry) will inevitably result in an intensification of the ongoing power struggle between the two factions of the Serbian elite, the pro-Westernizers and the political pragmatists, unless Vucic tempers his approach. Failure to do so will force the country into the same manipulated "civilizational choice" that the West imposed on Ukraine in November 2013, which would ultimately work out to the US' grand strategic benefit at the expense of every Serbian. Provocatively speaking, it might follow the Ukrainian scenario so closely that a Color Revolution breaks out in Belgrade, albeit with diametrically different geopolitical consequences than the pro-Western one that succeeded in Kiev.

Bosnia:

Moving along, Bosnia and the other two remaining Balkan countries that will be discussed have agreed to Membership Action Plans with NATO, which means that they have officially committed their governments to a path that's supposed to end with NATO membership some time or another. It's practically impossible for this scheme to succeed in Bosnia without a renewal of civil warfare between Republika Srpska and the Croat-Muslim entity, but more than likely, that's the point of Sarajevo pursuing such a farfetched plan. The Serbs would never accept joining NATO because that would lead to the extinguishment of their autonomous republic, but reversely, if the autonomy of Republika Srpska could be revoked (the scenarios of which Sarajevo and its Western patrons are subtly exploring), then NATO membership would be institutionally uncontested and incapable of being stopped. As has been discussed extensively already, Bosnia is a giant geopolitical time bomb that's waiting to be detonated by the West, and Sarajevo's determined and timed movement towards NATO could be the spark that lights the next Balkan fuse.

Macedonia:

The surface conviction among many is that Skopje has committed itself to an irreversible pro-Western trajectory regardless of leadership, and judging by official statements on the matter, that does indeed seem to be the case. Digging deeper, however, and unraveling the changing domestic and international contexts surrounding Macedonia, the argument can convincingly be made that there's more than meets the eye when it comes to Skopje's pro-Western institutional associations. December 2014 forever changed the calculations of the Macedonian leadership because of the Russia and China's dual announcements of the

Balkan Stream and Balkan Silk Road megaprojects, respectively, both of which are envisioned to crucially transit through the country's territory.

Of course, neither Great Power would have made such ambitious plans without having first consulted with the Macedonian government, and Skopje was more than willing to agree after taking stock of the enormous economic windfall that it would receive from either project's successful completion. Also, neither Moscow nor Beijing likely made any ultimatums to Skopje for its cooperation (such as saying that it mustn't join NATO and/or the EU), but that it was probably strongly implied that substantially moving forward with either of these 'formal' institutional goals could endanger the projects, and thus, the geostrategic and economically profitable benefits that Macedonia stood to incur.

After discreetly acquiring Macedonia's advance approval for their initiatives, Russia and China went public with their regional visions, but this triggered the US to initiate its back-up regime change plans for the country in order to keep it firmly in its orbit and pressure it to cancel the multipolar megaprojects. The US was probably tipped off to its geopolitical rivals' plans well in advance and had begun tinkering with a destabilization scenario in Macedonia long ago, using it and its allies' spy agencies to surreptitiously wiretap government and private citizens for use in a forthcoming political blackmail campaign. In the months preceding the monumental multipolar announcements relating to Macedonia, the US ordered its regime change proxy, 'opposition' leader Zoran Zaev, to selectively release suggestive snippets from the Western intelligence agency-doctored 'recordings' in order to test the waters and gauge the public's reaction.

After recognizing that the 'wiretap' scenario had the potential to stir a critical mass of manipulated public unrest (with the hand-in-hand support of Soros-affiliated organizations and media outlets), the US knew that it had a powerful tool with which to pressure the government. Prime Minister Gruevski didn't fold to Washington's implied regime change demands, however, and he instead stood proudly defiant in the face of the externally imposed coup attempt being pursued against him. At around this time in early 2015, he probably started getting second doubts about his 'Western partners' (if he hadn't had them already by this point) and questioning the strategic wisdom of continuing his country's established pro-Western course.

At the same time, being the leader of a super-strategic but comparatively small country, Gruevski keenly understood his limits of action and came to the conclusion that forcefully rejecting the West would be contrary to his and his country's physical security. This explains why his formal statements are in support of the unipolar EU and NATO, while his multipolar actions in cooperating with the Balkan Silk Road and Balkan Stream megaprojects speak more sincerely to the strategic direction that he truly plans on taking his country. Gruevski's prudence in taking this approach was vindicated after the US attempted an unsuccessful Hybrid War push against him in May 2015 (Zaev's failed Color Revolution intermingled with the Albanian terrorist plots in Kumanovo), showing the desperate lengths that they were willing to go in getting him removed and stopping the multipolar megaprojects.

Despite this obvious regime change attempt and the subsequently more subtle methods being employed to try and oust him (the EU-mediated 'negotiations' with the 'opposition' and the forthcoming early elections), Gruevski is still aware that if he succumbs to the emotional temptation to publicly disown the EU and NATO in response, then he might fall victim to an assassination attempt (which is what the plane scare over Switzerland in late-May 2015 was meant to convey to him). For these reasons, the Macedonian Premier must

continue his clever game of telling the West what they want to hear while doing the opposite in practice, although it's unclear whether he can continue doing so indefinitely without being forced by the US into making a resolute choice one way or another.

For the time being, however, although Macedonia is formally pursuing integration into Western institutions, its policies in practice are purposely ambiguous, and in light of the changed domestic and international circumstances that were just explained, one should hold off on rendering full judgement about Gruevski's officially declared commitments until after he gains more freedom of political maneuverability following the early elections in April.

Fighting Back

The final Balkan country that has yet to be discussed is Montenegro, which just received its [official invitation to join NATO](#) during the bloc's early-December meeting in Brussels. Even before the announcement was ever formally made, Prime Minister Djukanovic (the country's ruler in one form or another for almost the past thirty years) [declared](#) that his country would unreservedly accept NATO membership, prompting an [unprecedented display of public unrest](#). The majority of the 600,000 or so Montenegrin citizens are against their country joining the same military bloc that bombed it 16 years ago when it was still part of rump Yugoslavia, and the political opposition has called for the issue to be put before a referendum. The government refused to accede to their suggestion and instead responded with [disproportionate force](#) that suppressed the protests and produced an ever stronger reaction of anti-NATO sentiment.



Anti-NATO protests in Montenegro were brutally suppressed by local police.

The result was that the violent crackdown predictably intimidated some of the population and led to a noticeable decline in their outward protest activity. This government interpreted this according to its preordained expectations and assumed that this meant that the anti-NATO movement was finished. That wasn't the case, however, since the form of resistance had [simply adapted](#) to the repressive conditions in the country and moved away from large manifestations in the capital in favor of smaller gatherings in the towns and villages. On the one hand, this was a tactical necessity in order to preserve the protesters' safety, but on the other, it created the deceptive illusion that the population had been forced into complacency and may have unintentionally contributed to NATO going forward with the membership offering, as opposed to withholding it out of fear that extending the invitation would push the country over the edge and result in the overthrow of their long-cherished proxy.

As it stands, it's expected to take between one to two years for Montenegro to complete the NATO accession process, meaning that there's a critical last-minute window of opportunity for the protesters to make history and be the first to carry their country away from the organization after it's already agreed to join. Theoretically speaking, it's entirely possible for Montenegro to set a new precedent in this regard, but it's clear that the only way to do this is by overthrowing the government or pressuring it to the extent that it acquiesces to a referendum. Granted, even a public vote might not be enough to stop the NATO machine, since it's unsure at this time whether it would be just as crooked of a motion

as the previous ballots held under Djukanovic's rule. More than likely, given the donkey-like obstinacy that Djukanovic and his Mafioso clique have, plus their propensity to resort to extreme violence amidst pressure, it's probable that the only way to reverse the NATO decision is to replace Djukanovic with a sincere opposition figure that will pull Montenegro out of the initiation process before it's fully completed.

Montenegro's strategic importance to NATO is disproportionate to its tiny size, and its membership in the bloc is an important step in bringing Serbia more firmly under Atlantic control. Assuming the most negative scenario where Montenegrins are unable to save their country from occupation, then NATO would have succeeded in tightening its noose of encirclement around Serbia and would then feel more confident in making bolder moves against it and Republika Srpska in the future. Keep in mind that Montenegrins are closely related to Serbs and that many Serbs still live in the country. Officially, the government lists them as being 28% of the population, but given Djukanovic's history of statistical manipulations (be it in the 2006 independence referendum or every election in which he's ran), the real percentage is likely higher. This is all very important for NATO since they know that they can thus exploit Montenegro as a 'social laboratory' for perfecting informational and other strategies for use against the larger Serbian demographics in Republika Srpska and Serbia, thereby giving their campaign in the tiny Adriatic country a heightened strategic importance that is usually lost on most observers.

Concluding Thoughts

With all that being said, the anti-NATO and anti-government resistance movements in Montenegro (which are morphing into a unified force at the moment) are indispensably important in pushing back against NATO's "Drang Nach Sueden". Their success would provide the Central Balkans with strategic breathing space and stunningly put a sudden halt to the strategic plan that the US had taken for granted up until that point. Looked at from the opposite perspective, NATO sees the incorporation of Montenegro as one of the final pieces in completing its geo-military encirclement of Serbia. It also tangentially expects to receive valuable social feedback from this experience that it can then weaponize against Republika Srpska and Serbia, and the critical momentum that Montenegro's accession would create could turn into a psychological battering ram for diminishing the population's resistance in these two states and the Republic of Macedonia. Due to the high stakes involved for all sides, it's doubtful that Djukanovic and his allies would leave in peace if confronted with a renewed opposition movement against them, thus raising the disturbing specter that the country might descend into civil war if its people try to free themselves from impending NATO domination.

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