



Western Balkans and EU Security & Defence: Contributions, Challenges, and the Way Forward

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Introduction

Three decades after the Yugoslav wars, the Western Balkans are gradually shifting from a stabilisation target to emerging contributors to Europe's security. This transition accelerated after the adoption of the [European Union's \(EU\) Global Strategy \(2016\)](#), signalling the bloc's geopolitical aspirations. The region has expanded both institutionalised and ad hoc cooperation with the EU in the areas of migration and combatting organised crime, violent extremism, and radicalisation. The Western Balkans are now increasingly embedded in Europe's wider security framework.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has further accelerated the shift. The return of large-scale interstate warfare to Europe has moved defence and deterrence to the centre of the EU policy agenda and, by extension, of EU–Western Balkans relations. All six Western Balkan countries have responded, albeit in different ways, to the transformation. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have aligned with EU/G7 sanctions against Russia, as well as with related political positions. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has largely followed EU declarations despite internal political divisions. Kosovo, despite not having formal diplomatic relations with Ukraine, has supported its sovereignty and coordinated closely with the EU and NATO, fully aligning with EU sanctions even though it is not formally assessed under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). By contrast, Serbia refused to join the Western sanctions and remains only partly aligned with the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Yet, according to reports, it indirectly provided ammunition to Ukraine. This combination of political alignment and material contribution reflects the region's growing ambition to be recognised as a credible security partner for the EU.

Yet there are hurdles along the way: political fragmentation, outstanding disputes and security issues, and incomplete reforms. BiH, Kosovo, and Serbia are still outside NATO – unlike Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Although not full members, BiH and Serbia have Partnership for Peace Agreements (PfP) with NATO. BiH and Kosovo still host EU and NATO peacekeeping missions, underscoring entrenched vulnerabilities and the continued need for external security guarantees. Gaps in military modernisation, incomplete Security Sector Reform (SSR), infrastructural limitations, and fiscal constraints pose a further challenge.

The Western Balkans, therefore, face a dual reality. Reliant on external security provision and burdened by internal problems, the region nonetheless began shifting from being [a consumer of security](#), but cannot seem to shed the narrative of instability. This tension between dependence and ambition will shape the next phase of EU–Western Balkans security ties.

The Backstory: A Longstanding Security Contribution

In the past two decades, the Western Balkans have made efforts to reposition themselves as contributors to Euro-Atlantic security through participation in international military missions, NATO and EU operations, and significant Security Sector Reform (SSR) at home. Historically, the distinction between being a security recipient and provider has been blurry: several countries that hosted peacekeeping missions simultaneously contributed personnel to operations abroad. This trajectory shows that Western Balkan armed forces have long served as security contributors alongside European actors, predating the current strategic reorientation prompted by Russia's war against Ukraine.

NATO

The region has contributed to NATO-led operations. Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro deployed troops to International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support in Afghanistan, as well as to the ongoing KFOR peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. Albania has consistently punched above its weight, maintaining roughly 500 troops deployed abroad at any given time. North Macedonia's Krivolak training range has developed into a major hub for NATO exercises, hosting large-scale Allied drills in 2025. All three also participate in [NATO Air Policing](#) and the [NATO Response Force](#). BiH contributed military observers and a unit to ISAF. Kosovo, due to the position of four non-recognising NATO member states, does not formally contribute personnel to NATO missions but has participated in military exercises and pursued sustained diplomatic engagement with the Alliance. Serbia participates in officer training, interoperability programmes, and multinational exercises through its [Partnership for Peace \(PfP\) relationship](#).

Table 1: NATO missions – Western Balkans contributions

Mission / Operation	Type	WB Participants (verified)	HQ / Lead	Notes
KFOR (Kosovo Force)	NATO	Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia	Prishtina (KFOR HQ)	NATO peacekeeping force in Kosovo; WB NATO members contribute troops
NATO Air Policing	NATO	Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia	Allied Air Command	Provides access to airspace
NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP)	NATO	Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia	Eastern Europe (Baltics/Poland)	NATO deterrence deployment: WB NATO members contribute personnel abroad
NATO Response Force (NRF)	NATO	Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia	NATO HQ & Allied Commands	NATO high readiness force; WB NATO members contribute; Serbia participates only via PfP
ISAF / Resolute Support (Afghanistan)	NATO	Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia	Kabul	NATO-led international security and training missions in Afghanistan; WB members contributed troops and observers
Krivolak Training Centre exercises	NATO	Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia	Krivolak, North Macedonia	Major NATO training hub hosting Allied drills; demonstrates WB support for Alliance readiness

CSDP

The Western Balkans have also contributed to the EU's [CSDP](#). All countries in the region, except Kosovo, due to its non-recognition by five EU member states, have signed Framework Participation Agreements with the EU, allowing them to contribute personnel to missions and operations led by the Union. Kosovo, while not formally participating in CSDP missions, has been cooperating with the EU on an ad hoc basis on issues such as counterterrorism and the prevention of violent extremism.

Albania and North Macedonia are part of [EUFOR Althea](#), acting as security providers in BiH. Military and civilian personnel from the Western Balkans have been deployed across Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, filling critical operational gaps in CSDP missions as trainers, medical teams, engineers, or military observers. Although outside the EU framework, Kosovo has trained Ukrainian demining personnel, drawing on its own post-war experience in explosive ordnance disposal. It has also [approved the deployment of troops](#) to an international security force in Gaza under a US-backed stabilisation initiative – both reflecting its growing engagement in multinational peace operations.

Despite its limited scale, this involvement in CSDP missions demonstrated the Western Balkans' added value to the EU, served as a learning platform, and enhanced interoperability with the EU. Thus, these contributions have added a security dimension to the EU accession process. That dimension has been playing a critical role in the region since 2022.

Table 2: CSDP missions – Western Balkans contributions

Mission / Operation	Type	WB Participants (verified)	HQ / Lead	Notes
Operation Althea	CSDP	Albania, North Macedonia	Sarajevo (EUFOR HQ)	EU military peacekeeping mission in BiH; WB states contribute personnel
EUTM Mali (ended May 2024)	CSDP	Serbia, Montenegro	Bamako	EU military training mission for Malian armed forces; ended in May 2024
EUTM RCA (Central African Republic)	CSDP	North Macedonia, Serbia	Bangui	EU military training mission supporting RCA armed forces; ongoing
Operation Atalanta (Horn of Africa)	CSDP / EU Naval	Montenegro, Serbia	Northwood (EU Naval HQ)	EU counter-piracy operation off Somalia; WB members contributed naval personnel and staff officers

Regional Cooperation

In addition to international deployments, Western Balkan countries have pursued regional defence cooperation, although in many cases Kosovo is excluded or limited to observer status. An example is the [Balkan Medical Task Force \(BMTF\)](#), headquartered in Skopje, North Macedonia, a multinational military medical unit composed of personnel from five Western Balkan countries (excluding Kosovo) and Slovenia, capable of providing medical support in crises. Other regional security initiatives include [RACVIAC](#), which facilitates defence dialogue and institutional exchange, fostering joint training and knowledge-sharing across the region. The South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) operates at the political-military level, enhancing strategic coordination and promoting collaborative planning among defence authorities. [The Adriatic Charter \(A-5\)](#) focuses on NATO-oriented defence alignment, supporting interoperability and integration with broader Euro-Atlantic structures.

Table 3: Regional cooperation on security and defence

Platform / Initiative	Purpose / Role	Western Balkan Member Countries	Notes / Observers
RACVIAC – Centre for Security Cooperation	Framework for defence dialogue, institutional exchange, confidence building	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia	Kosovo participates in activities under special arrangements
South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM)	Political-military coordination at ministerial level	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia	Focused on regional SEE cooperation; observer countries are outside Western Balkans
Adriatic Charter (A-5)	NATO-oriented defence alignment	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia	United States is non-Balkan member; Kosovo participates in some events

Regional cooperation is developing on a “minilateral” basis too. In March 2025, Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo signed a [Joint Declaration on Defence Cooperation in Tirana](#), aimed at strengthening trilateral military coordination and regional security. The agreement focuses on expanding cooperation in defence capabilities, military education and training, joint exercises and procurement, and defence industry development, as well as on coordination regarding emerging security challenges, such as hybrid threats. Belgrade framed the agreement as destabilising and as undermining regional security balances, primarily due to Kosovo’s inclusion and its support from two NATO member states, Croatia and Albania. Serbia perceived it as a challenge to its national security environment and a source of further regional polarisation.

Overall, the Western Balkans have developed a track record of consistent engagement in international security efforts. This long-standing engagement forms the backdrop to the Western Balkans’ current role in European defence debates and highlights the fact that recent support for Ukraine and increased defence investments represent a continuation of an already established trajectory of security contributions.

Defence Industrial Potential

The Western Balkans also matter for their defence-industrial potential. The region is home to roughly 200 companies in that sector, located primarily in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina – largely legacies of Yugoslavia’s Cold War-era policy of non-alignment. Many produce for export markets: in 2024, Serbia registered foreign arms sales of USD 100 million; Bosnia’s defence exports reached USD 200 million in 2025. The facilities have the capacity to produce artillery shells compatible with both NATO (155 mm) and former Warsaw Pact specifications (152 mm), making them well-suited to meet Ukrainian demand.

Table 4: Western Balkans' aid to Ukraine

Country	Type of Support / Contribution	Notes / Context
North Macedonia	Transferred legacy Soviet-origin equipment: T-72 tanks, Mi-24 helicopters, Su-25 aircraft, and munitions and spares	Equipment immediately usable by Ukrainian forces; significant operational value
Albania	Donated MRAP vehicles, small arms, and mortar ammunition of various calibres	Total aid estimated in the tens of millions of euros; documented in theatre
Montenegro	Contributed naval and artillery munitions	Smaller-scale support, focused on specialised ordnance
Kosovo	Supplied vehicles and ammunition packages; hosted training for Ukrainian forces	Contribution despite the absence of formal bilateral recognition by Ukraine
Serbia	Officially avoided direct military aid; provided budgetary and humanitarian support; reportedly supplied ammunition via third parties	Estimated value of third-party ammunition supplies: ~ EUR 800 million by end-2024
Bosnia and Herzegovina	The defence industry channelled ammunition to Ukraine	Exact volumes unclear; reflects industrial support rather than direct government-led military transfers

To develop their defence industries, the Western Balkans could significantly benefit from integration into EU initiatives such as [Security Action for Europe \(SAFE\)](#). Unfortunately, both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the two leading defence manufacturers, are likely to remain excluded for the foreseeable future due to insufficient alignment with the EU CFSP, notably the sanctions on Russia. Albania and North Macedonia are, in principle, eligible, but SAFE funds cannot be spent on partner-country territory, limiting the practical impact. There are further opportunities through [EDIP \(European Defence Industry Programme\)](#), which sets aside EUR 1.5 billion in grants for 2025–2027, and through bilateral defence industrial cooperation with EU member states.

The critical question is whether the Western Balkans would be able to integrate meaningfully into an EU-backed innovation ecosystem. As the war in Ukraine and the recent conflict in the Gulf show, the key to security and defence is technology-intensive weapons systems, notably unmanned platforms, and strategic enablers such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Developing advanced technologies through multi-country consortia benefits civilian industries too. Recent investment developments suggest the region is beginning to attract external partners: in Kosovo, a state-owned ammunition factory with Turkish company MKE begins production in 2026; in BiH, US company Regulus Global has acquired a stake in Pretis, aiming to reach one million artillery shells annually by 2028; Albania has signed agreements with Fincantieri and Leonardo; North Macedonia is set to host a USD 150 million

facility by UK-based Burstock; Serbia is pursuing a “Digital Army” framework and a joint drone venture with Israel’s Elbit Systems.

Some Western Balkan countries have taken steps to cultivate ties with the [European Defence Agency \(EDA\)](#): Serbia became the first non-EU country to establish formal working relations with it in 2014, and Albania and North Macedonia’s security partnerships with the EU explicitly mention EDA cooperation. Ideally, all six Western Balkan countries should become EDA members, possibly without voting rights until they join the EU. There is a growing appetite among EU member states – France, Italy, and others – for deepening defence industrial cooperation with the region.

The Western Balkans could also benefit from physical infrastructure with implications for defence. Corridor VIII running between the Adriatic and the Black Sea coast acquired new strategic significance with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine: improved east-west road and rail connections are instrumental to moving troops and materiel to the eastern flank. In February 2026, [NATO formally designated Corridor VIII](#) as critical infrastructure for the swift movement of forces from the Adriatic coast toward the Alliance’s eastern flank.

Obstacles

Despite the progress that the Western Balkans have made toward becoming a net contributor to European security, formidable hurdles remain.

Political Fragmentation

The Western Balkans remain politically and structurally divided in their geopolitical alignments, hampering deeper security cooperation. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are NATO members and closely align their security and defence policies with Western standards, contributing troops to Alliance missions and reforming their forces to meet collective requirements. In contrast, the three remaining countries sit outside full NATO membership, creating an uneven strategic landscape.

Formally neutral, Serbia has close ties with both the Russian and Chinese governments, with the latter accounting for 60% of weapon imports. Over the past decade, Belgrade has imported FK-3 long-range air defence systems and CH-series drones from China, and received MiG-29s, helicopters, Pantsir systems and armoured vehicles from Russia. Ties to Moscow and Beijing have become politically salient in the context of the protests against President Vučić. At the same time, Serbia cooperates with NATO through Partnership for Peace (PfP), has procured Rafale jets from France, and, according to reports, has delivered ammunition to Ukraine via third countries. Public opinion remains shaped by the legacy of NATO's 1999 bombing, limiting the scope of cooperation, while the switch to Western defence technology will take considerable time.

BiH's NATO bid has stalled due to internal opposition, particularly within the Serb-majority entity Republika Srpska – though there may be signs of a more neutral stance emerging in 2026. Kosovo's unresolved international status remains another key constraint: five EU member states (four of them also NATO members) do not recognise Kosovo, barring it from PfP, OSCE, and most CSDP missions despite its hosting of KFOR and full political alignment with the West. So long as Serbia pursues a [multivector](#) foreign policy, BiH's internal politics block full NATO integration, and Kosovo remains unrecognised by key actors, deeper security cooperation will continue to face limitations.

Bilateral Disputes and the Lack of Trust

A persistent question is how the region can be a contributor to European security while simultaneously challenging it. Many regional security cooperation platforms established with EU and NATO support are now dysfunctional due to internal frictions – including the Serbian and Bosnian Serb blocking of Kosovo's participation – and a broader lack of trust among neighbours.

Layered on top of alignment gaps are persistent bilateral tensions, particularly the Serbia–Kosovo issue. The 2022 crisis in northern Kosovo illustrated the fragility of the security situation, with clashes in May 2023 severely injuring dozens of NATO troops. These events exposed

the limits of local institutions and the international presence in enforcing law and order in contested areas. The Banjska attack in 2023, where heavily armed Serb militants clashed with Kosovo police while Serbian troops were gathered at the border, underscored the risks of organised violence and Kosovo's structural reliance on NATO as a guarantor of stability.

Despite the ongoing EU-facilitated dialogue, Serbia's unresolved position regarding Kosovo continues to spark episodic crises, actively stoked and instrumentalised by the ruling party. The inclusion of Kosovo in the trilateral defence agreement with Croatia and Albania has generated significant political backlash from Serbia, which framed the initiative as a strategic threat. In response, Serbia has intensified its bilateral defence cooperation with Hungary, with a 2025 agreement foreseeing expanded joint exercises, training, and defence modernisation efforts, interpreted regionally as a counterweight to the Tirana Declaration.

One should not lose sight of the security implications of Serbia's rearmament. In 2025, Belgrade spent about EUR 2.8 billion on defence (2.6% of GDP), roughly equal to the combined defence budgets of Croatia, North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro. Coupled with connections to Russia and China, this raises concerns among regional neighbours. Taken together, these developments illustrate that security cooperation in the Western Balkans increasingly reflects competing alignments within the same strategic space.

Gaps in Security Sector Reform

Security sector reform is among the key factors that have underpinned the Western Balkan countries' ability to participate in overseas deployments and international security cooperation. Following the wars of the 1990s, countries across the region embarked on extensive efforts to rebuild and modernise their military and security institutions, aligning them with Euro-Atlantic standards. The Security Sector Reform (SSR) focused on professionalisation, restructuring of armed forces, and strengthening democratic civilian oversight and parliamentary control over the security sector, principles strongly promoted by both NATO and the European Union as part of integration processes.

Serbia pursued significant defence reforms after its 2000 democratic transition through PfP engagement, though challenges remain in fully consolidating democratic governance across the security sector. For Albania and North Macedonia, SSR was closely tied to NATO integration, culminating in membership in 2009 and 2020, respectively. BiH's 2005 Defence Law unified entity-level armed forces under a single state-level chain of command. Kosovo evolved from the Kosovo Protection Corps through the Kosovo Security Force (2008) to the Kosovo Armed Forces in 2018, progressively expanding its mandate. This ongoing trajectory of reform and operational participation provides the broader context for the Western Balkans' growing role in European defence today.

Economic Challenges

A final key issue is the economy. The Western Balkans are a collection of small-sized economies, with the relative exception of Serbia. Unless they work together, they will struggle to attract international investment in the security sector. The Western Balkans have yet to produce a success story involving a big European, Turkish, or US defence contractor setting up shop locally. Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia have all committed to NATO's 3.5% of GDP goal for core defence spending, but are currently at around 2% of GDP and cannot be expected to reach the target before the mid-2030s. Serbia is currently spending around 2.4–2.5% of GDP, which, coupled with its scale, suggests it will absorb the bulk of modern hardware and military technology going forward. The scale challenge is illustrated by recent revenue data: while Montenegro's defence companies tripled their turnover within two years and Bosnia and Herzegovina's defence industry grew by nearly 40%, both markets remain structurally small and dependent on external demand driven by the war in Ukraine rather than sustained domestic investment.

Policy Actions to Undertake: From Contribution to Integration

EU member states should recognise the political and economic benefits of cooperating with the Western Balkans on security and defence. They should take steps to amplify processes which are already underway.

1. Reframe the Western Balkans as EU partners in security and defence assessments

In EU security, defence, and enlargement-related assessments and reporting, the Western Balkans Six – including Kosovo – should be systematically recognised as EU partners and countries of special interest within the evolving continental security architecture, rather than treated primarily as external enlargement candidates. This shift should be reflected consistently across EU security and defence policy documents, CFSP and CSDP alignment assessments, enlargement progress reports, and capability development frameworks.

2. Integrate aligned Western Balkan countries into the emerging European defence architecture

Rather than creating a separate Western Balkans-specific track, the EU should seize the current momentum toward deeper defence integration as an opportunity to meaningfully include aligned Western Balkan countries in common defence planning from the outset. Given that defence remains an emerging EU competence and that deeper integration will inevitably involve non-EU states, the Western Balkans can contribute to and benefit from a broader European security agenda in which all participating states engage as equal partners. This framing serves both the goal of regional defence integration and the broader project of European strategic autonomy. The European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) should include scorecards tracking CFSP alignment, operational contributions, and capability development in the annual accession reports to monitor progress.

3. Grant full participation in EU defence instruments to fully aligned countries

EU defence cooperation frameworks should be updated to reflect both existing Western Balkan participation in CSDP and Permanent Structured Cooperation PESCO and the evolving landscape of instruments such as SAFE and its successors. Countries demonstrating full and sustained alignment with EU foreign and security policy should be granted full participation in these instruments, moving beyond the current ad hoc approach. Gradual access should be extended to others based on demonstrated convergence.

4. Use conditionality and incentives to encourage alignment among partial partners

For countries such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the two largest regional defence manufacturers, deeper access to EU defence initiatives should be conditioned on sustained

alignment with EU foreign policy positions. At the same time, the EU should offer tangible benefits to incentivise alignment and help cushion its domestic costs, recognising that exclusion from EU frameworks also weakens the region's overall contribution to European security.

5. Enable regional security cooperation by reducing political blockages

The EU and NATO should mandate flexible participation formats that allow smaller-scale regional coalitions to operate within CSDP, PESCO, and NATO partnership initiatives. Mechanisms such as the so-called Footnote Agreement, already in place to enable Kosovo's participation in a range of EU programmes, should be extended to security and defence, given the country's clear alignment with EU and NATO positions and its heightened security vulnerabilities. Access to EU defence instruments should be linked to participation in joint regional and EU projects, and political endorsement and targeted funding should be provided for trilateral and small-group formats, integrating them into EU and NATO planning cycles.

About us

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a group of policy analysts, scholars, and researchers established as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans and the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. It works to advance the European integration of the Western Balkans and to support the development of democratic, open, and resilient societies across the region. BiEPAG brings together leading experts from the Western Balkans and across Europe, recognised for their expertise and in-depth understanding of the region and the political, economic, and social processes shaping its future.

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The European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation, and King Baudouin Foundation, dedicated to strengthening democracy, advancing European integration, and reinforcing the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's shared challenges. Its strategy focuses on three core areas: fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation, and supporting the EU integration process.

EFB works to strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, while promoting cooperation among civil society actors through solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides platforms and opportunities for informed and empowered citizens to advocate for accountable institutions and democratic governance, with a strong emphasis on supporting continuous reforms in policies and practices as countries progress toward EU accession.

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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was established in November 2008, following the designation of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. It is an interdisciplinary, cross-faculty institution dedicated to research and education, providing a platform for the university's diverse teaching and research activities on Southeast Europe, while fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Centre also serves as a hub for information and documentation, and as a point of contact for the media and the wider public interested in political, legal, economic, and cultural developments in Southeast Europe. Its interdisciplinary team, comprising legal scholars, historians, and political scientists, contributes to the field through articles, monographs, and other publications. The Centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to advance cutting-edge research on Southeast Europe.

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