

U.S. Course Of Action For Select Balkan States

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Abstract

Europe has undergone a dramatic transformation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The breakup of the Republic of Yugoslavia was just one of the major subsequent events, along with, among others, the wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation, vis-à-vis the Russian diaspora in Eurasia; all of which enveloped the whole of Europe in one form or another.

As the Russia-Ukraine War and the 2026 U.S. conflict with Iran unfold, the world order continues to change. Given Europe's capricious and mercurial constitution, it behooves the U.S. to continuously analyze its relationships. This paper focuses on the Central Balkans aspect, as the author addressed other aspects of Europe in a previous article, "NATO's One-Inch War".

America's relationship with several of the Balkan states has been strained, often rooted in divergent views on Russia. It is time to resolve intransigent issues hewed to by ostentatious diplomatic dogma. The author's objective is to identify, analyze, and evaluate these issues to recommend a transformation of current diplomatic beliefs. To do this, the author analyzes narratives involved that influence attitudes and opinions, and addresses modifications to the current world order vis-à-vis the U.S., select Balkan states, China, the EU, and Russia. This is important to enhance the U.S.'s access to this part of the world, while impeding certain interests of Russia and China.

The author aspires to enlighten the West toward a more prosperous path forward, including strengthening and securing the U.S. currency as the global currency, enhancing U.S. access to rare-earth minerals, limiting Chinese and Russian access and influence, and recognizing friendly, western-oriented diplomatic players. Accordingly, the U.S. should view these Balkan countries as strong future allies. Bottom line: if the U.S. does not fill the void, China and/or Russia will continue to do so, and that is not in the United States' interest.

Keywords: Balkans, North Macedonia, Republic of North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, China, Russia, Balkans Access, Silk Road, Bosnia, Central Macedonia, Balkan Peninsula, Balkan States, Greek Provinces, Belt and Road, Republika Srpska (RS).

Date of Submission: 01-05-2026

Date of Acceptance: 11-05-2026

I. Balkans



(Roman Chernyshev - Ontheworldmap.com, 2024)

To discuss the "Balkans," one must first specify which countries make up the Balkans and, for that matter, what I refer to as the Central Balkan states; specifics vary by source. Allcock, Crampton, and Danforth (2026) describe the Balkans as a region shaped by diverse cultural and political influences...consisting of Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia. Complicating the issue are portions of Greece and Turkey.

In this article, I focus primarily on the Balkan States of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and their propinquities.

Regarding the great powers' global game, in addition to U.S. interests, there are the interests of the Russian Federation, China, and, of course, the European Union. It is time to reassess the U.S. relationship with certain Balkan states, because the Balkans have long been a flashpoint for European Wars that resulted in the deaths of millions. It has historically been a strategic crossroads of trade routes connecting Europe to the east, as Tosevski (2024) noted, “turning the region into a crossroads of cultures, empires, and strategic ambitions. Empires passed through, merchants exchanged goods and ideas, and rival powers watched the land closely, knowing that whoever influenced the Balkans could shape the balance of an entire continent” (para. 1).

Adroitly dubbed the powder keg of Europe, the mosaic of ethnic groups in the Balkans is not just a flashpoint for ethnic discord, sectarian conflict, and social unrest; it is also a critical and influential issue in what I call oil-and-gas politics.

Russia and China’s interest and activity in the Balkans are not waning. As Hicks (2024) indicates, Russia leverages historical ties and political influence, while China’s significant infrastructure investments are part of its broader strategy to gain a foothold in Europe.

The West should not walk away from the Balkans and nations like Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. BalkanView (2025) emphasized that “NATO’s presence, E.U. engagement, and coordinated policies addressing organized crime, migration, and regional disputes are essential to prevent instability from spilling across borders. Furthermore, the Balkans remain a stage for global influence, where powers like Russia, China, and the United States assert their interests” (para. 10).

II. Republic Of North Macedonia



Flag of the Republic of North Macedonia (MK, 2024)

As the map above shows, Macedonia is landlocked and borders many countries. Given that its population is diverse with major ethnic populations of Albanians, Romani, and Turks, its capital, Skopje, is “known for its blend of historical and modern architecture, as well as its rich cultural heritage.” (EBSCO Research, n.d.)



Skopje Image source, Getty Images

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, Macedonia became an independent state in 1991. However, Greece disputed her name, resulting in her 2018 name change from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to the Republic of North Macedonia. A sovereign country of just under two million citizens, the federal level comprises judicial, executive, and legislative powers.

In 2020, the Republic of North Macedonia became a member of NATO and is striving to join the European Union. It is also a member of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).

In 2024, the Republic of North Macedonia elected its first female president, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. The West should act aggressively and positively toward North Macedonia's westward orientation to neutralize both China's and Russia's efforts to co-opt North Macedonia into their respective spheres of influence.

Deralla (2025) explains:

While Russia has not established large economic footholds, one Russian-origin businessman (Sergey Samsonenko) serves as an example of how informal networks provide access and influence. However, many other companies, including Lukoil, with a major presence in the country's market, have operated for years, providing an economic platform that plays an important – though indirect – role in the political and media spheres.

As pushback against European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) integration, Russia is using what we call in international relations the “Natural Alliance” theory, appealing to North Macedonia's Slavic roots, cultural ties, shared values, and relative geographic proximity.

Russia pushes back in the Balkans for the same reason they push back in Ukraine. From Russia's perspective, the West is interfering in Russia's perceived sphere of influence, and it would be no different if Russia attempted to integrate Canada or Mexico into its institutions. From Russia's perspective, NATO's attempted expansion into Ukraine was a bridge too far and the cause of the Russia-Ukraine War. The author addressed this issue in his previous article, “NATO's One-Inch War”.

Regarding cultural values, it is no secret that both the Chinese and Russians try to leverage what they call the “decadent” West's globalist government's liberal values, and accordingly, they point out that the West often cannot define what a woman is.

Foreign influence in North Macedonia operates through cultural and media channels, embedding external agendas into everyday life (Deralla, 2025). As Najcevska (2022) notes, Slavism is always present in texts celebrating Cyril and Methodius. The Day of the All-Macedonian and All-Slavic Enlighteners, the Day of the All-Macedonian and All-Slavic Culture and Literacy, the Day of the Thessaloniki Brothers, Holy Apostles Cyril and Methodius, the Macedonians!

The narratives of “Slavic brotherhood,” “Orthodox values,” and “Western interference” are deeply entrenched in North Macedonia's political scene and institutions, including academic circles and universities, which are seen as extensions of foreign control rather than as expressions of domestic self-determination (Civil Today, 2025). North Macedonia must sift through the targeted hybrid information campaign run by both the East, through Russia, and the West, through the EU and the U.S.

Deralla (2025) argues that political elites in North Macedonia are so dependent on Serbia's political leadership that they rarely make a move without either seeking Belgrade's approval or fearing its wrath.

China is also aggressively targeting North Macedonia to expand its soft-power influence. There are additional ways China counters U.S. efforts.

...China's “soft power” is exerted in two main dimensions. The first is in the category “news management,” as some Macedonian print and online media publish columns and articles by the Chinese ambassador in the country. The second dimension of “soft power” is the category “sending strategic messages,” with China acting within the framework of cultural cooperation between twin towns or through activities implemented by the Confucius Institute, which is integrated into the State University Sts. Cyril and Methodius in Skopje (Blazheski, 2003).

In February 2017, China entered the North Macedonian railway sector by selling its trains for passenger transport.

As with the U.S., China and Russia seek strategic access. The U.S. must be aware of this growing Chinese influence in the cultural and educational sectors and assess whether North Macedonia's contemporary leadership is capable of countering this pressure. Additionally, via BRICS, China and Russia pose a threat to the dollar's role as the global currency. Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) is an intergovernmental organization designed to provide alternatives to Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, offering a way around the SWIFT banking code system and the U.S. dollar, and therefore, diluting Western sanctions.

The election of President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova was a great step forward, and there are other North Macedonian westward-oriented politicians with great potential, such as Claudia Kmet or Jovica Strasevski, who recognize the threat and are capable of taking appropriate action against unchecked external influence in any ministerial or ambassadorial role. North Macedonia continues to align credibly with Western democracies, passing election legislation in 2025. “The election legislation provides a suitable framework for holding democratic elections” (North Macedonia Report 2025, n.d.).

North Macedonia has solid and improving relations with its neighboring countries, balanced by mutual intentions to maintain good relations, helping to overcome any isolated disagreements. The United States should act now to bring the Republic of North Macedonia into its fold as an extremely close and reliable ally. As of

March 2026, the U.S. and North Macedonia are advancing a framework to address environmental, intellectual property, labor, and digital trade. In addition to U.S. access, it "...is a major transportation corridor from Western and Central Europe to the Aegean Sea and from Southern Europe to Western Europe (globalEDGE, n.d.)."

North Macedonia is home to several mountain ranges with significant rare-earth potential that has yet to be realized or exploited. It is Western-leaning, seeks greater integration with the West, shares the West's democratic values, and is pro-American. The U.S. should act now with greater conviction toward this end.

III. Bosnia And Herzegovina (Bih)



Flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina (On the World Map, n.d.)

Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose capital is Sarajevo today, has three branches of government: Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary. "Sarajevo is the political, financial, social, and cultural center of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (BBC News, 2025).

As the map above shows, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a mostly landlocked country with only a 20-kilometer outlet to the Adriatic Sea. Cataliotti (n.d.) explains that...Bosnia and Herzegovina is bordered by Serbia, officially the Republic of Serbia. This is a separate entity from Republika Srpska, though the name "Republika Srpska" literally means Serbian Republic.

According to the U.S. Department of State (2000), Bosnia and Herzegovina has three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats. Basta (2016) argues that competition among Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethnic groups is rooted in collective identity. Bosniaks preferred a multi-ethnic territorial framework, while Serbs and Croats preferred a territorial architecture and an ethnic division.

It also has a diverse mix of religions, including Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, and a population of just under 3.5 million.

In 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence from Yugoslavia, resulting in a savage internecine conflict between Serbs and Bosniaks, killing over 13,000 people in and around Sarajevo. "The Serbs' strategic goal was to create a new Bosnian Serb state of Republika Srpska (RS) that would include Bosniak-majority areas—encircled Sarajevo" (Hartmann, 2007).

Having been in Bosnia and Herzegovina during and after the war, I can testify to its brutality. Sarajevo was particularly vulnerable as it was surrounded by mountains. The December 1995 Dayton Agreement ended the siege.

The situation is complicated; while the Republic of Serbia and Republika Srpska had extremely close cultural and geographic ties, it was not until the Dayton Agreement that Republika Srpska gained a clearly defined, internationally recognized geographic area of control, including its capital, Banja Luka. Also, the Republika Srpska held significant territory within Bosnia and Herzegovina, the latter committed to keeping Bosnia whole.

According to BBC News (2025), Bosnia and Herzegovina comprises two autonomous entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. These come under the federal government and the rotating presidency. Al Jazeera (2025) reported that the regions have some joint institutions, including the army, the top judiciary, and the tax administration. Milisic (2025) explains that...Bosnia as a country relies on a power-sharing system in which the two entities are closely linked. Republika Srpska's challenge to state institutions and the rise of secessionist threats can undermine the country's national stability.

If that is not complicated enough,

Republika Srpska, in turn, consists of two separate entities, connected via a neutral district, Brcko, to the north. The Brcko district was created after the war in 1995 to ensure that Bosnian Serbs did not control a single, continuous territory within Bosnia and Herzegovina, bordering Serbia. Brcko has its own administrative status within Bosnia and Herzegovina (DW, 2023).

Aca (2023) explains that the Republika Srpska, which comprises half of the Bosnian state, cannot deploy an independent armed force under international agreements, and that Bosnia's multinational army is obliged to protect all citizens, regardless of religion or race.



Sarajevo Image source, Getty Images

There is pressure coming from several sources for Republika Srpska to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Certain Republika Srpska politicians, many ethnic Serbs within Republika Srpska, and Russia, to name a few. Some liken the Republika Srpska situation to ethnic Russians living in the disputed areas of Ukraine.

The Republika Srpska, as the subject, emphasizes para-diplomacy to achieve agency, aligning with Serbia and Russia while resisting Bosnia and Herzegovina's centralization efforts. Accordingly, Republika Srpska becomes the object of great power politics.

With the February 2025 sentencing of the Serb-run Republic of Srpska president, Milorad Dodik, for alleged separatist actions, strains began to intensify between the two autonomous entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (which is a decentralized federation of Croats and Bosniaks), and the Republic of Srpska, which threatened to pull the bordering country of Serbia deeper into the conflict.

As noted by Borger (2025), "Dodik told his supporters the conviction was "nonsense" and called on them to "be cheerful". He then said that Bosnia and Herzegovina had "ceased to exist" and, in an apparent move towards secession, had local laws passed that ban the presence of national law enforcement or judicial officials on Republika Srpska soil" (para. 4).

If the U.S. were to strengthen ties, cultivate deeper engagement, and increase investment in Bosnia and Herzegovina and bordering Serbia, it could mollify rising polarization and discord between the two autonomous entities, helping to avoid another internecine conflict in the region. This would also align with President Trump's desire to smooth relations with Russia and to assuage tensions among all countries involved.

As of the spring of 2026, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a member of NATO. It is a member of the NATO Membership Action Plan and continues to work toward membership. It is also not a full member of the European Union but continues to work toward membership. Like the Republic of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a member of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).

There is an old saying I picked up from my international relations courses: There are two things one should never see being made: sausage and foreign policy. This is true in the United States, and it is just as true in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Accordingly, one must take corruption charges with a grain of salt. As Franklyn D. Roosevelt stated, referring to a rather controversial, international leader, "He might be a son-of-a-bitch, but he is our son-of-a-bitch." One must keep in mind the fragility of political institutions and governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, accordingly, understand that accusations of corruption are free-flowing.

It is common knowledge that politics is a rough-and-tumble contact sport. As my relative, Will Rogers, once said, "One cannot have gone through life without having done something wrong. If I saw an investigating committee coming my way, I'd just plead guilty and throw myself on the mercy of the court."

Accordingly, it is in the interest of the United States to look past certain accusatorial issues and work with the person in Bosnia and Herzegovina who most strongly leans Westward and, in particular, supports U.S. platforms.

One of them is Nenad Nešić, a Bosnian Serb politician who served as Minister of Security from 2023 to 2025. He previously served in the House of Representatives from 2018 to 2022. He is the president of the Democratic People's Alliance and desires a closer, better relationship with the U.S. The Bosnia and Herzegovina elections are scheduled for October 2026, and Nenad has the experience, perspective, and positions the U.S. should look for in a leader. Potentially politically motivated accusations and charges should be set aside, while policy favoring the West should be at the forefront of consideration.

As with North Macedonia, the U.S. should act constructively and positively toward Bosnia and Herzegovina's westward orientation to counter both China's and Russia's efforts to permanently co-opt it into their respective spheres of influence. China is aggressively targeting Bosnia and Herzegovina to expand its soft-power influence. Appointing a permanent ambassador would be a good step forward.

While the autonomous region of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, remains closely tied to Belgrade, Serbia, it remains integrated with both the EU and Moscow. As noted in the Strategic Importance of the Balkans in Europe:

While Serbian politicians express a desire for closer ties with the EU, practical efforts have been minimal. Russian influence remains strong in Belgrade, reflecting historical ties and strategic interests. However, Serbia's economy is closely linked to the EU, making complete alignment with Russia economically untenable. This duality affects neighboring Bosnia, where Republika Srpska's leaders often follow Belgrade's geopolitical stance. A decisive shift by Serbia towards the EU could transform the region's dynamics for the better. (Hicks, 2024)

The Chinese are working to counter U.S. efforts.

The Prime Minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nermin Nikšić, and the Federal Minister of Health, Nediljko Rimać, met in March 2026 with representatives of China's Sinopharm International Corporation and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Accordingly, 52 million euros will be invested in the Clinical Center of the University of Sarajevo and 48 million euros in the Livno Cantonal Hospital (Sarajevo Times, 2026).

The U.S. is moving in the right direction to enhance its relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina through the Southern Gas Interconnection Pipeline, an initiative to diversify Bosnia and Herzegovina's energy requirements away from Russia and toward the U.S.

As highlighted by the U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2025), the country currently receives 100% of its gas from Russia. The Southern Gas Interconnection Pipeline will connect Bosnia and Herzegovina pipelines to Croatia's pipelines, leading to the LNG terminal on Croatia's Island of Krk. According to Onyango (2026), the newly formed U.S. company, AAFS Infrastructure and Energy Investment firm, will be the project's lead investor and operator, sidelining the state-owned utility BH-Gas.

As reported by Kotseva (2026), AAFS also expressed interest in related energy projects, including the potential construction of gas-fired power plants and the management of Sarajevo and Mostar airports through long-term concessions, and promised significant investments to modernize facilities, expand flight connections, and boost passenger traffic.

U.S. involvement should also focus on easing ethnic divisions within Bosnia and Herzegovina and between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The world does not need another internecine conflict in the Balkans, in which the people suffer, and nuclear superpowers collide, so this is a win for all parties involved.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is home to several mountain ranges rich in rare-earth minerals that remain unexploited.

IV. Serbia



(bwallpapers.com, 2014)

While Bosnia and Herzegovina has struggled to integrate into Europe due to Republika Srpska's separatist aspirations, its neighbor, Serbia, has been walking a tightrope between East and West.

Serbia is a landlocked country bordered by Bosnia and Herzegovina and several other countries. Serbia, whose capital and largest city is Belgrade, became an independent state in 2006. Belgrade is located where the Sava and Danube rivers converge.



Belgrade Image source, Serbia.com

As Biserko (2021) indicates, Republika Srpska is treated as a state within Serbia, and the disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state goal to which both EU membership and Serbia's essential national interests are subordinated.

One may logically ask why Serbia didn't just co-opt Republika Srpska. Had the Republic of Serbia simply coopted Republika Srpska, this would have been viewed internationally as a war of aggression by the Republic of Serbia as opposed to a civil war between factions within Bosnia and Herzegovina. This would have prompted a serious reaction from the West, leading to moves to punish Serbia. Hence, the term "powder-keg" is used when describing the Balkans. The lingering tensions have the potential to erupt into an internecine war that could drag in the great powers.

In my discussions with Russian diplomats and representatives over the years, they consider Serbians and ethnic Serbs to be Russian both culturally and religiously, which is also why Russia, despite the West's positions, essentially supports Republika Srpska as an independent country.

The Serbian Constitution states: "The Republic of Serbia shall protect the rights and interests of its citizens abroad." Concurrently, the Serbian National Security Strategy commits to preserving Serbian culture wherever ethnic Serbs live. Serbia has rejected EU sanctions against Russia while still strongly desiring EU integration.

Serbia, without a shot being fired, exerts tremendous influence on the Republika Srpska and North Macedonia through propaganda, culture, religion, and ideology (Deralla, 2025), largely driven by Russia's geopolitical interests. Russia's approach is to destabilize the region in order to cause the West to back away from the Balkans.

Intelligence agencies play a role in the subversion of democratic institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. As Russia's regional proxy, Serbia is in bed with Russia with that approach. An approach theme of subverting, destabilizing, and eroding national sovereignty from within. The U.S. must act constructively on the diplomatic front to bolster its position in the region, thereby reducing ethnic tensions and preserving peace.

The Republika Srpska does not have an army, yet, in a peculiar yet clear line of reasoning, it considers the Serbian army next door to be its own. A common theme of Serbian thought was captured by the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia (2019), quoting the then minister of defense stating, "Republika Srpska was created by the Serbs, and only the Serbs could lose it, not anyone else. Republika Srpska was created by the Serbs united, and they can lose it only because of a lack of unity, not in any other way..."

So, Serbia offers contradictory policies. Serbia notes in its National Security Strategy a strong desire to join the EU while concurrently rejecting EU sanctions against Russia. In the meantime, Republika Srpska leaders turn to Russia and China amid perceived pressure from the EU and the U.S. and oppression in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the one hand, Serbia seeks EU membership and closer ties with NATO, but it plays China, Russia, the USA, and the EU against each other diplomatically.

As of the spring of 2026, Serbia is not a member of NATO. It is a member of the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) but does not participate, nor does it seek to participate in the Membership Action Plan (MAP). It is also not a full member of the European Union but continues to work toward membership. Like the Republic of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia is a member of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).

Another complex parameter involving Serbia and ethnic Serbs is Kosovo and its capital, Pristina. With the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Serbia refused to recognize Kosovo's independence. While Kosovo borders Serbia, it also borders Albania and has a population that is more than 90% Albanian and less than a 3% population of ethnic Serbs, mostly in the north of Kosovo.

Accordingly, Kosovo, a part of Serbia, autonomously declared independence in 2008; tensions between Serbia and Kosovo remain high. This includes violent interactions between ethnic Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, with the ethnic Serbs in Kosovo trying their best to integrate with institutions from Serbia. As of the spring of 2026, Kosovo is not a member of NATO. It is also not a full member of the European Union but continues to work toward membership. Like the Republic of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo is a member of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). While Kosovo has applied to the UN for a seat, it is opposed by China and Russia, and it still does not have one.

The West has worked tirelessly to keep the peace between Serbia and Kosovo, to integrate Kosovo, and to ameliorate tensions here, but this is another reason why the region is referred to as a powder keg. While the population of Serbs is shrinking in Kosovo, the International Crisis Group (2023) argues that it is in Kosovo's best interest that its Serb minority stay in the country and have an opportunity for self-rule, because this is the easiest way to build goodwill in Serbia and gain the concession that Pristina most wants – recognition.

Rare-earth element deposits offer Serbia undeniable geopolitical leverage toward the West. Accordingly, Serbia is a key player for countries wishing to engage in the Balkans.

Serbia has a huge lithium deposit, as well as large deposits of other rare-earth elements, making it a major player in the global rare-earth element supply chain and, in particular, the West's rush to secure rare-earth minerals.

Serbia Energy (2023) explains that it not only contributes to the country's GDP but also creates job opportunities, fosters innovation, and attracts foreign investment. The economic diversification resulting from rare earth metal production enhances Serbia's resilience to global economic fluctuations.

V. Conclusion

There is a strong need for continued Western engagement to keep the powder keg from blowing due to continued and enduring ethnic tensions intentionally inflamed by some involved. Depending on which side of the fence one is sitting, the blame can eventually fall. From Russia's perspective, they oppose NATO's eastward expansion, want to keep oil and gas flowing westward, and consider the Serbs and ethnic Serbs outside of Serbia to be doppelgänger Russians. From China's perspective, it seeks to maintain and expand its strategic footprint in the Balkans, largely to advance its Belt and Road initiative.

For the U.S., the situation in the Balkans is clear: the U.S. wants access to lines of communication, logistics hubs, potential bases, transit rights, oil and gas, rare-earth minerals, good relations, and peace.

Tosevski (2024) noted that "the region's political fragility demands careful management. Strengthening institutions, promoting dialogue, and addressing root causes of conflict are vital to securing long-term peace."

Serbia, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not our enemies. The West should make every effort to incorporate them more deeply into the Western sphere of influence. The goal should be to inhibit Chinese efforts to align these countries with China and, through economic and institutional engagement, to mollify Russia's grip on Serbia. Chinese representatives are actively targeting North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina by funding cultural projects, the Belt and Road Initiative, and health-sector infrastructure, with the clear objective of building closer alignment with Chinese interests and expanding their soft-power influence within local institutions, including the Ministry of Culture and Education.

The U.S. must work toward increasing access while abating cultural and ethnic tensions, which threaten another internecine war. Accordingly, the U.S. must work toward enervating Russia's Natural Alliance approach and China's economic approach by increasing economic engagement, including the exploitation of rare-earth elements and further integrating the Slavic areas with Western institutions. In turn, this U.S. effort will limit Chinese and Russian access while increasing U.S. access. This is particularly important as NATO continues to weaken. Further U.S. engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia will help stabilize relations between the two Balkan countries and the region writ large.

Additionally, this will push back against the BRICS momentum and the Belt and Road initiative. More effective engagement here will bolster President Trump's desire for closer integration with Russia, enhancing future access to rare earth mineral deals and, accordingly, further mitigating BRICS.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are a microcosm of the issues facing the Balkans writ large. Further integration and friendly collaboration among the U.S., the EU, the Balkans, China, and Russia are critical to avoiding another bloody Balkan war, building trust, and easing tensions. Having the right people in place is a critical piece of the puzzle to, as Hicks, (2024) noted, "resolve bilateral disputes, promote economic integration, and enhance infrastructure connectivity" (Hicks, 2024). This fact underscores the need for talented U.S.-leaning politicians in the region.

There is an old adage that a leader should surround himself with brilliance in order to appear brilliant. Accordingly, if the leader surrounds himself with idiots, he will appear an idiot. It is critical that North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina recruit the best talent with which to surround their leaders. North Macedonia would be well served by using Claudia Kmet and Jovica Strasevski. Accordingly, Nenad Nešić is a great choice for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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