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Veljko Blagojević
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The Geostrategic Significance of the Balkans in the Geopolitical Conceptions of Great Powers

Countries are molded by geography, which provides them with opportunities or limitations. Geopolitics in this manner served statesmen to assess, examine and conclude their political situation and power capabilities in comparison to others in their direct surroundings. According to Ratzel, states are geopolitical forces rooted and shaped by their natural environment. In order to develop or survive, states need to expand and acquire more resources and territory for their growth. The desire to accumulate power or gain a better position in global politics would eventually lead to conflict between the states since they all strive to same objectives.¹ Although this narrative served as a starting point for the Reich's war campaign, Nazi Germany wasn't the only power that devised its foreign politics based on geopolitical calculations. If we take a closer look at the world from the 19th century onward, we can see a pattern of realistic thought that served as a main propellant for the policy of great powers. Furthermore, great powers' view of the globe hinged on their future geopolitical projection towards different regions whose significance was determined based on the temporary world affairs.

Mackinder's and Mahan's classical theories show geopolitics as a tool for the state's strategy and policy. Mackinder took great pride in his British nationality, often emphasizing the democratic values which the western society has embraced. He endorsed the British hegemony as a rightful state

¹ K. Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2007, pp. 28–29.

of world affairs, stating that Britain must resist foreign imposters who are after its territory and resources. For Mackinder, the geopolitical order must be maintained by force since world politics was subjected to zero-sum calculations. His vision of land power was an aggressive concept constantly driven by expansion. The integrative character of the landmass compelled states to fight for hegemony because of the proximity and lack of natural barriers such as the ocean.² The landmass of Eurasia, as the largest in the world, was at the centre of his theory. The Heartland, which encompasses contemporary Central Asian Republics and parts of Siberia,³ was a pivotal region for global politics. The state controlling this region would be able to accumulate enough power, primarily through natural resources, and ascend as the global hegemon. In this manner, Mackinder perceived Russia as the most threatening country for the British Empire, often stressing that Britain must curb Russian interests in this area.

For Mahan, oceans represented broad highways that permit unobstructed movement for man-made vessels, allowing nations to trade and prosper. Certain paths, however, are more accessible than others; therefore, controlling such maritime points becomes increasingly important for a variety of states. Besides the commercial merits that the sea provides, Mahan also underlines the importance of oceans in terms of security. A well-developed navy will allow a country to easily project its power across the globe deterring potential enemies or interrupting their military campaign even before it can reach homeland shores. In order to accomplish greater sea power, countries need to enclose certain natural elements and adhere to particular social factors. A geographical position, physical conformation and the extent of the territory are predetermined geopolitical conditions which can constrain or accelerate the development of the state's naval capabilities. On the other hand, the size of population, the character of a nation and the model of a government are social factors which can be altered over time. Through his theory, similarly to Mackinder, Mahan vocalizes the importance of democratic governance as well as providing keynotes for the successful development of a state's power capabilities, albeit not on land but on the sea. Finally, instead of Heartland, in the sea power theory, the Mediterranean basin represents the pivotal region. Throughout history, the Mediterranean has been the centre of European pol-

² G. Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder*, Oxford 2009, p. 232.

³ Heartland is also described as a central region of the World Island (Eurasia and Africa) where rivers drain only to inland seas or frozen Arctic Ocean.

itics both commercially and militarily, many countries sought to control it or at least control its straits that provide access to the basin and even today the region plays a very important role in the context of Eurasia.⁴ The final author whose work we can't oversee is Nicholas J. Spykman and his Rimland theory. The Rimland theory represents a synthesis between Mackinder's land power and Mahan's sea power concepts. The theory encompasses the border region of the Eurasian landmass or Mackinder's so called inner crescent, spanning from Western and Eastern Europe, across the Middle East onto India, Tibet, China and Eastern Siberia.⁵ The border region of Eurasia is also analogical to Mahan's strategy of Anaconda. This concept represents the materialization of Mahan's strategic thought on American power projection over high seas onto the largest landmass that can house a hegemon, which can potentially compromise the United States global position. According to Mahan, it is imperative to control the shore regions of Eurasia as well as to deny similar territories to the enemies of a „talasocratic” power. From Mahan's perspective, the United States must strive to „sever” amphibious territories which provide sea access to the United States' main competitors on the Eurasian landmass, including Germany, China and Russia.⁶ The power able to establish full control of the Rimland region would most probably dominate the world politics or deny world hegemony to a potential Heartland power. Either way, Rimlands represent both the springboard or the barrier for any country that wishes to reach its global power apex.⁷ Rimland as an amphibious territory located between the Heartland and the sea has also functioned as a buffer zone between the two types of power. For Mahan, this region was the „debatable ground” that lies south of Russia and north of the Indian Ocean, the zone of conflict between Russian land power and English sea power. Mahan also underlines the significance of China, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey which are present in this middle strip as important factors that can influence the flow of world politics.⁸ Spykman, on

⁴ A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660–1783*, New York 1987, pp. 32–33, 35, 37–38.

⁵ N. Vuković, *Logika imperije: Nikolas Spajkman i savremena američka geopolitika*, Beograd 2007, p. 102.

⁶ S. Trifković, *Kontinuitet Hladnog rata: međunarodni odnosi početkom XXI veka*, Beograd 2017, p. 28.

⁷ D. Wilkinson, *Spykman and Geopolitics*, [w:] *On Geopolitics: Classical and Nuclear*, eds. Ciro E. Zoppo, Ch. Zorgbibe, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1985, p. 109.

⁸ R.D. Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*, New York 2012, p. 72.

the other hand, elaborates that the border region of Eurasia is not only torn between the two types of power, but it is also subjected to the turmoil that is produced by the countries within it. The uncertain nature of the Rimland region also corresponds with the Spykman's vision of international relations. For him, world politics is in a constant state of rupture. Great powers are like magnetic poles – political forces trying to shift the balance of power in their favor. The power disjuncture which results from such political behavior compels inferior countries to reorient or realign their foreign policies.⁹

The dynamic nature of great power politics suggests that the significance of certain world regions is subjected to alteration that corresponds to the evolution of strategy, technology and foreign policy interests of great powers. Mackinder's idea of Heartland and Eastern Europe as a gateway was based on imperial antagonisms between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain in Central Asia; Mahan focused his thought on American „thalasocratic” capabilities and power projection across the oceans while Spykman's design portrays the progression of these theories focused on Eurasia as a region that accommodates most of the world's great powers. Although none of these authors directly addresses the Balkans, the region is present on the edges of their theories whether that be Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean or the frontiers of Rimland.

Before we examine the Balkans in the context of great power politics, a brief explanation of geostrategy is useful. As geopolitics represents the correlation between geography and politics, geostrategy, correspondingly, binds geography with strategy. Geostrategy has its roots in the German word *Wehr-geopolitik* and was often misinterpreted as defensive geopolitics or war geopolitics. Frederick L. Schuman was one of the first authors to use the term geostrategy in his work „Let Us Learn Our Geopolitics” in 1942. Geostrategy as a term is often confused with geopolitics because of their similarities. However, geostrategy is mostly focused on strategic, thus, military aspects of geography and what repercussions it may cause on states' security. Aleksandr Dugin defines the term as „the military aspects of geopolitical analysis”. In his papers, Brzezinski also underlines the importance of strategy for geopolitics, arguing that strategy serves the purposes of reaching the ultimate objectives which are of greater military value. Distinction between geostrategy and geopolitics can be made based on the questions these disciplines are trying to answer. Geopolitics is focused on: „who has the rights to a certain territory?” and „how to accomplish a particular political program?” while

⁹ N. Vuković, *Logika imperije...*, p. 78.

geostrategy is trying to answer: „how to control a particular territory?” and „accomplish war objectives most efficiently”.¹⁰

Humans are inherently territorial and their affinity for a particular area or terrain always has a security dimension. This geographical association is usually perceived through politics and power, hence, the military does play an important role. The relationship between geography and politics is profound, which naturally extends to the relation between the military and geography as well.¹¹ The military is dependent on geography in terms of logistics, supplies and area accessibility. Physical geographical conditions are always intruding on strategic calculations hindering military movement, denying certain areas of operation or complicating the chain of supply. Notwithstanding the revolution in military affairs and the development of new technologies, studying geography is still important for military deployment. Great distances and geographical constraints are present in the nature's environment and some of them represent insurmountable obstacles for the development of the military strategy. The United States still needs their bases in the coastal regions of Asia-Pacific in order to effectively contest Chinese influence, while Russia is still striving for its European military assets in Ukraine and Crimea. If these countries somehow fail to project their power into the Black Sea basin or onto the coastal areas around Taiwan, it means that their strategies are flawed reflecting the weakness of their military-political thought.¹² Geostrategy thus provides the instruments how to determine the importance of geography for the military strategy, which inevitably affects the state's grand strategy. Because of their unique geographical layout, certain regions vary in their geostrategic significance. Factors such as proximity to major sea routes or straits, the physical terrain of an area, the abundance of natural resources or the position of some territories in comparison to other more important world regions determine the geostrategic significance of a particular area. Great powers devise their strategies and vectors of foreign politics based on these geostrategic presumptions.

¹⁰ M. Stepić, *Geopolitika: Ideje, teorije, koncepcije*, Beograd 2016, p. 88.

¹¹ C.S. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy*, Oxford 2013, pp. 124–125.

¹² Idem, *The Future of Strategy*, Polity Press 2015, pp. 58–60.

The Balkans: From the Berlin Congress to the Great War

The great powers' interest for the Balkans¹³ began to develop during the 19th century. The Ottomans, who conquered the peninsula in the Middle Ages, managed to maintain a relative status quo in this part of Europe for more than four centuries. At the start of the 19th century, rebellions broke out across the Balkans, demonstrating peoples' discontent with the Sultan's politics which was largely prompted by the overall degradation of the Ottoman society and its political system. Russia was one of the first states that recognized the significance of the uprisings and reached out to the Orthodox populace of the Balkans. The growing Russian geopolitical desires towards the Balkans, throughout the 19th century, aroused suspicion among other European powers, especially in Austria-Hungary. As the Ottoman power entered its final phase of decline, the Russians started to barge in on the peninsula's Christian populace, spreading their influence deeper into the Balkans, thus aggravating the Danube's Monarchy. The Austro-Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Andrassy was particularly aware of this. He tried to alert Vienna of the possible threats the Russian power can cause on the Balkans regarding the further expansion of the Monarchy's geostrategic objectives towards Bosnia, Croatia and Adriatic coastline. Russia has always been the bugbear of the Hungarians. Relying on the Slav populations in Hungary, the Russians were trying to usurp the Monarchy's power in the region. As Andrassy often underlines, Russia was trying to assert its position in Serbia and Croatia, therefore securing its domination over the Danube.¹⁴ Although the prime minister was correct regarding the growing Russian influence in the region, he misinterpreted the precise vectors of the Russian foreign policy objectives.

¹³ The Balkan peninsula is a region in southeastern Europe that spans from the rivers of Danube and Sava in the north to the Mediterranean coast in the south and from the Adriatic coasts in the west to the Black Sea shoreline in the East. The exact geographic borders of this region are hard to define because they are overlapping with historical, cultural, geostrategic and geopolitical frontiers that have played a significant part for the construction of the term Balkans. For the sake of this essay, the Balkans implies the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece and Turkey because of their status as objects in the projections of the great powers, M. Skakun, *Balkan i velike sile*, Beograd 1982, pp. 8–9.

¹⁴ I.D. Armour, *Apple of Discord: Austria-Hungary, Serbia and the Bosnian Question 1867–71*, „The Slavonic and East European Review” 2009, Vol. 87, No. 4, pp. 629–680, 633–636.

St. Petersburg at that time saw Bulgaria rather than Serbia or Croatia as an important hub for the Tsardom's maritime expansion.

Russian historical interests are primarily focused on the establishment of warm water sea ports. During the 19th century, Russia's economy was heavily dependent on the Black Sea harbors and political relations with Istanbul. Dardanelle and Bosphorus straits served as convenient chokepoints for the Russian economy exports, since more than 50 per cent of its economy revenue went through the Black Sea. Henceforth, the war that ensued in 1877, notwithstanding the costs for the Russian army, was an important step towards accomplishing these maritime objectives. The war, which was a quick military endeavor, ended favorably for the Russian armed forces in 1878 with the Treaty of San Stefano. The treaty was drafted and imposed on the Ottomans as it was envisioned by the Russian officials, meaning the creation of a large Bulgarian state consisting of two provinces including Constantinople Conference with the addition of Thrace but without Dobrudja.¹⁵ The creation of such a state radically altered the power balance on the peninsula while providing Russians direct access to the straits and thus to the Mediterranean Sea.

At the first glance, the San Stefano Treaty seemed as a benevolent act that can even serve the interests of some European powers. Andrassy was feeling safe realizing that Russian interests were directed towards the straits and not the Adriatic coastline, while other European land powers saw this as a potential solution for the „sick man” on the Bosphorus problem. To tell the truth, only Britain understood the full scope of consequences that the creation of greater Bulgaria and Russian entrenchment on the straits could induce on the European balance of power as well as on the British interests in Asia. The British were quick to act, their main concern was to keep the Ottomans in Europe, at the same time positioning themselves in the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin.¹⁶ London's idea was to alert the other European countries of the potential threat that a tellurocratic hegemon could achieve by effectively establishing control over the straits and projecting its power further into the Mediterranean. We can clearly see the „thalassocratic” mindset of the British government at that time. Germany or Austria-Hungary, as land-based powers, were feeling relatively safe and unaware of the consequences that the Russian southeastern maritime expansion can invoke, after all the Russians weren't trying to infringe on

¹⁵ B. Jelavich, *Russia's Balkan Entanglements 1806–1914*, Cambridge 1991, pp. 173–175, 205.

¹⁶ M. Gibson, *Dracula and the Eastern Question: British and French Vampire Narratives of the Nineteenth-Century Near East*, Basingstoke 2006, p. 71.

„mitteleuropa” or push towards the Adriatic coastline. The British, on the other hand, as a distanced sea power, realized that the creation of Great Bulgaria and the control of the straits would effectively nullify the Crimean war accomplishments. As Mahan suggests, in order to be successful, a sea power must deter its potential adversaries before they can reach suitable shorelines that can allow their future maritime development. With the San Stefano Treaty, the Russians were on the verge of accomplishing those objectives. Pushing the Ottomans out of the Balkans and controlling the straits, the Tsardom would eventually develop its maritime power and threaten the Suez and British colonial ambitions. In this case, the Balkans served as a tool for the Russian interests to reach the straits and their final prize which was the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁷

The Berlin Congress which followed the San Stefano Treaty that same year redesigned the Balkans and established new spheres of control. The Congress, which lasted a month, gathered all four European powers including Russia, Britain, Austro-Hungary and Germany. From the Balkan perspective this congress was important because it led to the formation of independent states on the peninsula emancipated from the Ottoman reign, but on the level of great powers the congress was primarily focused on two things. First, Russia was forced to reconsider the San Stefano treaty and the creation of Great Bulgaria. Second, Vienna was already planning its occupation and eventual annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Those were also the two main geostrategic dilemmas for Germany's power balance on the Balkans, i.e. how to curb the Russian influence and expansion, at the same time allowing another power to enlarge its territories on the western shores of the Peninsula. This was particularly burdensome for Bismarck's foreign politics. Germany's interest for the Balkans was relatively low, for Bismarck found the land not even worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. However, Bismarck was aware of Germany's rising power and was wary that the future development of the German Empire would invoke hostile alliance formed by other European countries. Therefore, it was of outmost importance to have good relations among Berlin–Vienna–St. Petersburg, the cornerstone of the Three's Emperors League which was the foundation for Germany's unhindered power ascendancy.¹⁸ For Bismarck, the main goal was to restore the status quo in South Eastern Europe as much as possible, using tools such as partition, population exchange and rearranging

¹⁷ The positioning of naval bases in Tartus should also be perceived from the angle of Russian attempts to entrench themselves in the eastern part of the Mediterranean basin.

¹⁸ M. Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers 1804–2012*, London 2012, pp. 136–138, 145.

borders, which consequently laid the foundations for the Great War. The conclusion of the Berlin Congress lingered with resentment and discontent among the belligerents. The revision of the San Stefano treaty dissolved the ideas of Great Bulgaria, creating a country that was twice smaller than proposed by the Russians. The only clear winners were Austro-Hungarians, who gained Bosnia, Herzegovina and Sanjak allowing them to contain the westward expansion of the Serbs and potentially Russian interests that followed; although this proved to be a fatal mistake which later ended the multi-cultural empire. We also shouldn't forget the distanced sea power that managed to take hold of the Cyprus.¹⁹ Having acquired Cyprus, the British crown deployed around 7,000 troops on the island, which allowed them to bolster their control over Suez and the Eastern part of the Mediterranean basin. Although the island alone doesn't represent an important military base, it is a significant hub in a bigger strategic layout, which allowed the British to extend their control over land and sea bases across the Mediterranean and throughout the Middle East. In the coming Great War, this provided an important springboard for the British offensives against Turkey. Moreover, Britain's control of the Mediterranean corresponded with their overall power projection across the Eurasian heartland, in fact the Mediterranean sea functioned as a juncture between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. The British naval power was able to control the Rimlands of Eurasia mostly due to their uncontested presence in the Mediterranean basin.²⁰

The rearrangement of the Balkans echoed in other parts of the globe as well. Denying the straits for the Russians and scrambling their plans over Bulgaria, at the same time allowing the British to settle in the east of the Mediterranean Sea upped the stakes in the „Great Game” – the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia and the Caucasus. France also reacted to the British surprise acquisition of Cyprus by occupying Tunisia and expanding deeper into the Maghreb. This outburst of colonial activity was carried out with Bismarck's approval. Although Germany's main intentions during the congress were focused on the status quo and the balance of power, Berlin already knew the potential of the *Drang nach Osten* politics. Germany, as a land power, was naturally allured by the vastness of Eurasia and its Heartland. Allowing the Russians to settle on the straits and form a great Orthodox axis along the edges of Eastern Europe would effectively deny any future possibility of German expansion eastwards. Therefore, disrupting the

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 146.

²⁰ R.E. Harkavy, *Great Power Competition for Overseas Bases: The Geopolitics of Access Diplomacy*, New York 1982, pp. 50–52.

Russian maritime plans on the Balkan Peninsula allowed the Germans to prepare their military concepts for the upcoming war.

The Balkan issue was a second-rate crisis that could have been resolved by diplomatic means, but the great power contentions transformed it from a regional to a global calamity. Berlin was assured that the victory in the coming conflict is inevitable, realizing only later that the tides of war didn't favor the Central European hegemon.²¹ The Germanic factor played the crucial role in designing the geostrategic and geopolitical framework on which the Great War was instigated. Germany, as a rising industrial, political and military power, needed to expand its borders. Restrained by other powers, such as Britain, France and Russia, Germany saw the South-Eastern route across the Balkans as a natural gateway for its imperialist desires. The railway project Berlin-Baghdad was the embodiment of the *Drang nach Osten* politics at the turn of the century.²² Preoccupied with the imperialist ideas of expansion, Germany reflected its militaristic policy that raised suspicions among other actors. The accumulation of economic and military power was mirrored onto Berlin's aggressive foreign politics that was ultimately focused on radical power redistribution on the continent in order to accomplish world hegemony.²³

Other powers were also aware of the upcoming war. The departure of Bismarck and the coming of Kaiser William II alerted the Russians. The Russian officials were familiar with Bismarck's political schemes, but the new Germanic leadership manifested increasing ambitions focused on land expansion. The policy of balance of power on which Bismarck had built Germany's position as a European power, shifted in a different direction starting with the abolishment of the Reinsurance Treaty. With the new government in Berlin, the Russians didn't know exactly what to expect.²⁴ Germany's misadventures in Morocco and constant probing of the British naval capabilities, Russians' debacle in the Far East, lastly the annexation of Bosnia and Dual Monarchy's desires to spread its influence across the Slavic populace in the Balkans finally culminated in the First World War.

²¹ H. Kissinger, *Diplomatija*, Beograd 1999, p. 181.

²² V. Blagojević, S. Stojanović, *Zašto rat a ne međunarodni kongres 1914. godine?*, „Vojno delo” 2015, br. 3, p. 333.

²³ S. Stojanović, V. Blagojević, *Strategijski kontekst Prvog svetskog rata*, „Vojno delo” 2015, br. 1, p. 276.

²⁴ George F. Kennan, *The Faithful Alliance: France, Russia and the Coming of the First World War*, New York 1984, pp. 33–34.

Despite the initial successes of the Serbian army against the Austro-Hungarians, which consequentially forced the German military architects to redeploy some of their armed forces, the Balkan Peninsula as a geostrategic realm didn't overly-burden the war designs of the Kaiser's generals. The German forces were preoccupied with their own heartland position that forced them to wage war on two fronts. As a land power, Germany's outmost war principle, according to Moltke, was to wage a quick and deceive battle against France as the closest land power competitor that is in the country's immediate neighborhood, henceforth France represented the most pressing military issue. After quickly defeating the French, the Germans could focus on their eastern adversary. For German military planners, Russia could be deterred from further participation in war simply by waging a decisive battle on its inner territory. In truth, Berlin war struggles were focused on conquering and securing its western flanks before expanding its military campaign eastwards. The troop deployment provides further evidence to this, seventy divisions were deployed on the western frontier while only nine divisions remained on the eastern front. Furthermore, Moltke also deployed some of the reserve forces towards the northern coastal regions in Denmark and the Netherlands, afraid that a naval intrusion can occur during the course of war.²⁵

Although the Balkans were important for the Danube Monarchy, primarily because of its geopolitical pretensions towards the Adriatic shores and issues with the Slav population, the territory of the Peninsula wasn't envisioned as an integral part for great powers' military operations during the War. The initial Serbian victories over the Austrian army were only a dent on the mountain of power. Germany perceived the Balkans as an important geopolitical route for further expansion towards Persia and the Middle East. However, the Peninsula lacked the power potential to represent a more important target for military planners. The newly independent Balkan states were almost negligible in terms of military power. The maritime potential of the Peninsula, such as straits and access that they provided from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, was also largely unimportant since the Great War was a conflict primarily between land powers. If we view WWI from a Heartland-Rimland perspective, it can be questioned why Germany, as a Heartland power of Europe, didn't directly expand onto its Rimlands such as the Balkans? However, Germany's war allies, including Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey, were already heavily focused on the Peninsula and its

²⁵ S. Stojanović, V. Blagojević, *Strategijski kontekst Prvog...*, p. 269.

potential prizes at the end of the war,²⁶ which to some extent ratifies the importance of the Balkans for great powers and their geopolitical projections. Nevertheless, Germany, as country that had an unprecedented power capacity of that era, perceived the Balkans only as a facilitator for its larger geopolitical ambitions which were focused on Mesopotamia, Baghdad and the Greater Middle East – the region full of oil fields and strategic waterways.

Balkans in the Post-Bipolar World

It seems that the Balkans are in the centre of the world's attention only in times of conflict and trouble, otherwise the region is ignored by the great powers.²⁷ This became painfully obvious in the post-bipolar environment after the collapse of the Communist regimes and the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The „unipolar” moment which ensued was characterized by the events such as the unification of Germany, collapse of the Soviet Empire, expansion of NATO eastwards,²⁸ US operation in Kuwait²⁹ and ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia,

²⁶ We shouldn't disregard Russia in this matter, after all Russian eagerness for participating in the First World War was based on the potential prizes of the Turkish straits as well as destroying the multi-cultural Monarchy on the Danube.

²⁷ M. Glenny, *The Balkans...*, p. 662.

²⁸ Brzezinski explains how important the NATO expansion is for the US interest in Eurasia, especially emphasizing Eastern European countries and Ukraine. For him, this region is one of the most important areas with Ukraine as a pivotal country. As a buffer against Russia, Ukraine is crucial for European security. Moreover, the country is a pivotal point because of its geostrategic position to Russia. Without Ukraine, as Brzezinski underlines, Russia is no more a European power, but rather the former Communist hegemon and an Asian power consequently dragged in ethnic conflicts against other countries of Central Asia and probably China. Retaining the influence over Ukraine as a crucial geopolitical point, Russia would be able to impact European politics and dominate over non-Slavic population in the south and southeastern parts of the former Soviet Union. Ukraine was one of the first countries to sign the Partnership for Peace program which serves as the evidence of western policy makers commitment to separate this key territory from Russia, Z. Bžežinski, *Velika šahovska tabla*, Podgorica 1999, pp. 47, 89.

²⁹ The US intervention in Kuwait is significant in that manner because it started the so called revolution in military affairs (RMA). The extensive use of technology, primarily in air force, demonstrated that strategy and tactics have evolved and entered a next stage of warfare. The Kosovo intervention will also serve as a testing ground for the RMA and next generation of warfare.

which became the embodiment of Huntington's theory. These events directly or indirectly impacted the Balkans and its significance for global politics.

The last decade of the 20th century must be perceived through the Western, more precisely US perspective of geopolitical interests. After the end of the Cold War, the US emerged as an uncontested world hegemon able to project its power across the globe, thus sculpturing the mold of international relations by its visions of democracy. One of the primary interests for the United States was preventing or denying any other potential competitors to assert their influence over the regions that had been perceived as future NATO territories, such as the Eastern Europe and the Balkans. In essence, the disintegration of Yugoslavia was an inferior strategic issue for US policy makers in comparison to the Iraq–Kuwait problem, the dissolution of the USSR and the unification of Germany. Furthermore, Yugoslavia and the Balkans outside the bipolar context wasn't a crucial geostrategic hub. The collapse of Moscow's power meant that the role Yugoslavia had once played in a broader concept of Rimland and American containment strategy as an important buffer wasn't viable any more, henceforth the United States' disinterest³⁰ in the primary stages of the Yugoslav wars.³¹

In the new geopolitical order, America's vision was to push the east border of NATO towards Russia, denying the former communist power its access to Europe which would also position Germany deeper into the western sphere of influence preventing any attempts of the possible Germanic „renationalization” of foreign politics. In this concept, Yugoslavia was already deep within the NATO sphere, making its role of a strategic buffer obsolete in the new world order.³² The bloodshed which occurred as a consequence of frozen nationalism and ethnic conflict was deemed barbaric and unacceptable in western circles. However, the calamity in the Balkans was recognized not only as a humanitarian issue, but rather as a convenient situation to revitalize NATO and „reinvent” its structure as a military-political organization in the newly emerged international environment.

³⁰ The other factor which influenced the United States' indifferent posture towards the Balkans were the EU's plans to use Yugoslavia in order to affirm its CFSP as an important part of the Maastricht agreements and confirm its presence as an important political-military factor on the Eurasian landmass. In other words, the US didn't want to barge in on the Europeans regional affairs.

³¹ P. Simić, *SAD, NATO i jugoslovenska kriza*, [w:] *Savremeni procesi i odnosi na Balkanu*, eds. M. Stojković, A. Damjan, Beograd 1997, pp. 193–194.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 202–203.

Russia, as well as other non-western countries at the turn of the century, couldn't mount up effective opposition against the American promotion of global economy, democracy and growing interventionism. This became evident in the Balkans especially during the 1999 bombing campaign of the former Yugoslavia. In the absence of other power balancers, the US conducted, almost freely, the intervention in Kosovo. The humanitarian character of the intervention served only to justify a set of more realistic strategic goals of the air campaign. The violence on Kosovo provided an occasion and an opportunity to transform NATO's primary purpose from containment of Russia to the containment and management of rogue states as well as shifting the military alliance's point of focus from Central Europe to Southeastern Europe and the Balkans, and later to the Middle East.³³

The war in Kosovo primarily demonstrated two things: the persistence of classical geostrategic objectives that had been present since the 19th century Germany, at the same time showing the evolution of geopolitical thought prompted by globalization and technology. Kosovo was neither a security nor an economic threat for the American foreign interests. Despite the calls on spillover effects of violence onto other Balkan countries, consequently pitting Greece against Turkey,³⁴ the Kosovo war didn't have the capacity to engulf other neighboring states simply because most of the regional actors already saw their future in the western political structures such as NATO or the EU. The United States, similarly to Germany a century before, perceived the Balkans as a significant route or a logistical hub for its further engagement in the Greater Middle East area. The ethnic conflict in 1999 was a tertiary, at best secondary, matter for the US policy makers. However, the importance of Kosovo quickly rose thanks to the rapid development of information technology and globalized media. The rise of the global media „connected”

³³ J. Kurth, *First War of the Global Era: Kosovo and U.S. Grand Strategy*, [w:] *War Over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age*, eds. A.J. Bacevich, E.A. Cohen, New York 2001, p. 76.

³⁴ After the Cold War, the importance of Turkey rapidly grew in the eyes of the westerners. Its triangular geostrategic position between the Balkans, Middle East and Central Asia made Turkey a pillar of the American foreign policy in Eurasia. Greece, on the other hand, after the Cold War, faced a steady decline of its geopolitical significance. Furthermore, the government's approach towards the Yugoslav crisis and its close relations with Belgrade and Moscow raised suspicions among Washington's politicians, who perceived this as the renationalization of Greece's foreign politics. The fear of the Orthodox axis Moscow–Belgrade–Athens still lingers as a 19th century poltergeist among western decision makers, P. Simić, *SAD, NATO i jugoslovenska...*, p. 200.

the world, popularizing global events and influencing the opinions of the elite and the public as well. Gerard Toal underlines the significance of the so called „CNN effect” and its impact on the US decisions to intervene in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Somalia and Kosovo. For Toal, the media coverage made some of these regions more important than others, such as East Timor, Chechnya, Rwanda or Angola, where the bloodshed was equally horrific if not worse. To tell the truth, the media centrality made some of these areas and events more important, hence significantly boosting their geostrategic value in the current world politics.³⁵

During the „unipolar” moment, the United States was probably the only great power that had the capacity to independently make geopolitical projections not restrained by its economy, inferior status or political-social problems. For the US, as mentioned before, the Balkans provided a fine opportunity to redefine NATO as its important tool of foreign policy and power projection. Therefore, the geostrategic focus wasn't on the Balkans *per se*, rather it was directed towards its old adversaries such as Russia and regions that have the abundance of strategic resources, such as the Middle East. In the overall Great Game, the US is still aiming for hegemony over the Middle East and Central Asia, to connect the strategic areas of Heartland with the fabled Silk Road – with its trade routes and energy resources. Henceforth, the pivotal regions of Ukraine, South Korea, Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iran, which Brzezinski already portrayed in his book, represent the most significant geostrategic realms not only for the US, but for any country that aspires to become a world power.³⁶ At the turn of the century, the Balkans' peripheral status again served as a means to a greater end, a segment to a bigger geopolitical cloth woven by great powers. As Professor Stepic rightfully observed, the Balkans represent a zone of contact between the opposing power poles of world politics, across this territory great powers' interests have oscillated in accordance with their current geopolitical agendas. Because of its peripheral nature, the Balkans often found themselves between the rock and the hard place or served as a springboard for larger imperial goals.³⁷ The rise of the

³⁵ G.Ó. Tuathail, *The Postmodern Geopolitical Condition: States, Statecraft, and Security at the Millennium*, „Annals of the Association of American Geographers” 2000, Vol. 90, No. 1, pp. 171–173.

³⁶ E. Walberg, *Postmodern Imperialism: Geopolitics and the Great Games*, Atlanta 2011, pp. 233–234.

³⁷ M. Stepic, *U vrtlogu balkanizacije: političko-geografski položaj i fragmentiranost srpskih zemalja*, „Službeni list SRJ” 2001, pp. 98–99.

so called revisionist powers suggests that the Balkan Peninsula will have its role in the upcoming 21st century geopolitics.

Who is an unusual actor that will probably have a larger future impact on the region's geoeconomics³⁸ is China along with its One Belt One Road (OBOR) project. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) embodies Chinese foreign ambitions towards East, Central, South Asia; Middle East; Europe and East Africa, covering the fields of economy, science, culture and politics. This global economic endeavor actually represents Chinese grand strategy which will be spanning the globe over several decades until 2049 most probably, marking the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the PRC.³⁹ China, as a country the power of which is based primarily on vast production, is in a constant need of new markets and routes which can cost-efficiently deliver its products. BRI that encompasses both maritime and land routes aims to connect China with Europe as well as with other Eurasian countries along these routes.

In this grand scheme, the Balkans serve as a geostrategic juncture between the maritime route that starts from the eastern shores of China and follows the Rimland's coastline, finally reaching the Piraeus harbor, which then transforms into a land route that spans across Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary reaching lastly Central and Western Europe. The choice of Athens instead of some port-city in the northern Adriatic, which in terms of geography and logistics is maybe a better solution to reach inner Europe, shows that the Chinese policy makers are aware of the situation on the Balkans and geopolitical position of the coastline states regarding NATO interests. By choosing Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and even Hungary, the Chinese are using the „back-door” option for reaching European markets. All of these countries have a reasonable amount of historical, cultural, political and economic quarrels and disagreements with the western states,

³⁸ Geoeconomics can be described as a discipline which examines the effects of economy and trade upon a state's politics. In essence, the discipline underlines the significance of the global market and world economy in accordance with great power rivalry, in other words, modern hegemons are entangled in a dense network of economic interests which consequently governs their geopolitics. Geopolitics and geoeconomics are interlaced terms which are basically determined by the power standing of their consumers in the global hierarchy, M. Stepić, *Geopolitika: Ideje, teorije...*, pp. 368–369.

³⁹ W. Rohr, *Berlin Looking Eastward: German Views of and Expectations from the New Silk Road*, [w:] *Rethinking the Silk Road: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Emerging Eurasian Relations*, ed. M. Mayer, Basingstoke 2018, p. 230.

henceforth they were perceived as viable targets as well as participants for Beijing's endgame in Europe. The global objectives for China's grand strategy are aimed at counterbalancing the Trans-Pacific Partnership and reducing Russian monopoly on the northern railway routes that have served as an important pathway for the Chinese products to reach Europe. By realizing OBOR, Beijing will be able to get more favorable transport routes, at the same time mitigating the effects of the industrial overcapacity that has accumulated in the recent years. As for the Balkans, it is still early to disclose any potential values of this project. However, the prime ministers of Serbia, Hungary, Macedonia and China have already signed agreements regarding the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest railway in 2014 which proves the commitment of the Balkan countries to the Chinese grand strategy.⁴⁰ In this perspective, the Balkans will serve both as the final link of the maritime chain that follows the southern shores of Eurasia as well as the starting line for the land route that will push onwards to Central and Western Europe. In essence, the OBOR proves the old dictum – the Balkans remain the East for the West while representing the West for the East.

The United States along with NATO have managed to stabilize its presence on the Balkans with negligible human or material losses, filling the vacuum which occurred after the Cold War, at the same time connecting its European „torso” with east Mediterranean „limbs” (Turkey and Greece). NATO's expansion in the Balkans was one of the four main lines of the organization's enlargement vectors.⁴¹ With the NATO expansion, the Cold War formula of 2+2+2 became obsolete in the new regional milieu.⁴² The contemporary NATO setting on the Balkan Peninsula reflects the interests of a „thalassocratic” power. Namely, with the latest member (Montenegro), NATO effectively controls the shores of the Adriatic, the Black Sea, the Aegean, Ionian and Mediterranean Sea in this part of Europe. The Balkan countries are relatively limited in terms of military technology, personnel and economy, therefore we can't expect them to be crucial military actors in the Alliance, so why did the NATO leadership pushed for the expansion in

⁴⁰ A. Szunomar, *One Belt, One Road: Connecting China with Central and Eastern Europe?*, [w:] *The Belt & Road Initiative in the Global Arena Chinese and European Perspectives*, eds. Yu Cheng, Lilei Song, Lihe Huang, Basingstoke 2018, pp. 80–81.

⁴¹ The other three include Poland and the Baltic states as a northern route, the middle route which encompasses Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary; Caucasus-Caspian route which targets the countries of on the southern borders of Russia, such as Georgia, M. Stepić, *Geopolitika: Ideje, teorije...*, p. 411.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 410–411.

this relatively poor region of Europe? Including these limited armed forces of Balkan countries in the alliance, NATO is basically playing a long-term game considering the potential significance of the Balkan territory for future US adversaries. Making these countries member states of the Alliance, NATO is effectively denying these areas for possible revisionist powers which could threaten the United States interests in this region.

The EU's contemporary vision of the Balkans is that of a modern buffer. The expansion onto the Balkans implies the economic, cultural and political integration of nations which are far less developed than Western Europe – a burdensome task with questionable results. This kind of the EU's expansion is similar to that of NATO, that is to say Western Europe is exercising its soft power through sharing wealth and knowledge hoping to get a stable security cushion on its southeastern flanks.⁴³ All Balkan countries are actually directly or indirectly bound and dependant on Europe. They are components of this transnational organization or are in the process of becoming full members. However, Europe, similarly to NATO, can't expect to gain much from lesser developed states, henceforth its interests are primarily focused on exploiting their de facto geographical position. Integrating the whole of the Balkans into the EU, Brussels will effectively expand its periphery which can serve as an important buffer zone that can mitigate any potential threats that are coming from the Middle East or Asia.

The pro-Western attitude of most Balkan states, including neutral Serbia and its EU aspirations, leaves Moscow with limited possibilities. NATO and the EU have already firmly established their position in the area, leaving Serbia as the most friendly Russian state in the region. However, good relations between these countries don't necessarily mean Russian immanent engagement on the Peninsula. The tense situation in Ukraine and Russian engagement in Syria represent two crucial geostrategic points for the former Communist Empire. The significance of Ukraine as a pivot region both for the West and Russia was proved again in 2014, while the engagement in Syria has multi-purpose significance, which affects the Russian power projection capabilities, accomplishment of geostrategic objectives as well as securing the country's Caucasus frontiers. The temporary geostrategic significance of the Balkans in the Russian mindset is mostly based on energy corridors. The debatable south stream project, whether it goes across the Black Sea or Turkey, will traverse the Balkans and some of its states. Despite the western sanctions and the EU's

⁴³ S.B. Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, Lanham 2015, p 204.

disapproval of Russian foreign policy, the economy of Central and Southern European states is in the need of accessible and stable energy source. In this geopolitical concept, Balkan countries function as a transport route and an energy hub for cheap Russian gas. Therefore, the contemporary Moscow's foreign approach to the Balkans is more geo-economic in terms of resources and energy than geostrategic in terms of military and power projection.

However, in the long-term game, the Balkans could play a more significant role for the Russians' idea of neo-Eurasia. Neo Eurasianism is a concept formed by Alexander Dugin and can be defined as a project for the strategic, geopolitical and economic integration of the northern region of the Eurasian landmass, which is the cradle of European history and a matrix of the European populace. This grand project also signifies the shifting moment from a „unipolar” to a multipolar world with Russia as one of the core states.⁴⁴ According to Dugin, the Balkans would be integrated in this concept with Serbia as the most important state in this region. Serbia shares a similar geopolitical fate as Russia and is inherently perceived as a Russian appendage in South-Eastern Europe. For Moscow, Serbia is important because it occupies the central area of the Peninsula. In the context of neo Eurasianism, Serbia would be an important point for the Russian geostrategic projections against the thalassocracy of the US on the Peninsula.⁴⁵ Although neo Eurasianism, is a theoretical design, it portrays the Balkans as a relatively important zone of potential conflict between land based and sea based powers. Nevertheless, as with previous geopolitical conceptions of great powers, in this one as well, the Balkan Peninsula serves as a segment of a bigger Eastern European landscape that functions as a bridge to Central Europe as the most important area (Heartland) of the old continent.

Concluding Remarks

It seems that the Balkans have always been on the margins of classical geopolitical theories, while representing a peripheral area in the power projections of bigger players. Is the Balkans' geostrategic significance actually embodied in the auxiliary nature of its territory? If we compare the trajectories of geopolitical interests of great powers in the pre-bipolar and post-bipolar

⁴⁴ A. Dugin, *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo Eurasianism*, Budapest 2014, p. 35.

⁴⁵ M. Stepić, M. Stepić, *Geopolitika: Ideje, teorije...*, pp. 551–563.

era, we can observe a recurring pattern. In both cases, the Balkan Peninsula was perceived as a hub for further political penetration of the Greater Middle East area. The land routes which cross the region allow an unhindered supply chain from Central Europe across South-Eastern Europe onto the Middle East. Moreover, the Balkans' coastline which touches five minor sea basins has two important straits and connects with the Mediterranean, which also provides a maritime dimension to its land routes capacities.

These routes have both economic and military significance, controlling them can ultimately complicate or even deter major powers from their ambitions towards Asia Minor, Middle East or North Africa. Throughout history, we could also see how major political actors have exploited the Balkans in this manner, trying to establish spheres of influence over the Peninsula. However, the crucial thing that makes the Balkans a part of a greater geopolitical design and not an independent pivotal region is the impossibility of hosting an autonomous great power as well as the absence of strategic resources.

Areas that have the significance of a pivot region have distinctive traits, the most common being the direct proximity of the territory to a great power or the control of vast reserves of strategic resources. The Balkan Peninsula doesn't possess any of those. Although it is an important part in the Eurasian Rimland, the Balkans' primary geostrategic significance can be perceived as an important link in the patterns of power projection inwards or outwards of Eurasia. Mahan's perspective of the Mediterranean suggests similar results. If the Mediterranean is a maritime Heartland, the Balkans yet again serve as a link, but not as a pivot on the basin's shores, since Gibraltar and Suez are more important access points than the Turkish straits. The evolution of technology will hardly impact the importance of the Balkans since the region's primary purpose for great powers is its linkage functionality. However, the possibility of changing relations between Moscow–Berlin–Istanbul as well as China's growing geoeconomic interests for this area can significantly bolster the Balkans' value in the future geopolitics.

Summary

The Geostrategic Significance of the Balkans in Geopolitical Conceptions of Great Powers

The main goal of this paper is to present the Balkans as an integral part of the geopolitical projections of great powers on the Eurasian landmass. The

interests of great powers have shaped the geopolitical landscape throughout human history. Shifting the focus of their foreign policy agendas, powerful states have often affected the geostrategic significance of certain regions. Therefore, geostrategic significance cannot be treated as a predetermined category in geopolitics, because they are inherently affected by the changing nature of great powers' foreign policy interests. The architects of world politics are characterized as subjects, while the role of an object usually signifies lesser political entities on whom the politics is implemented. Central Asia, Middle East and East Europe are in the constant focus of great powers' political calculations, which makes them the pivotal regions of global politics. The Balkans also share the role of an object the geostrategic significance of which is conditioned by wider geopolitical trends in Eurasia. The disintegration of Yugoslavia has been exploited as a convenient moment in global politics to reshape the geopolitical portrait of the region, which also influenced the concepts of the European part of the Rimland theory.

Key words: Balkans, geopolitics, geostrategy, Eurasia.

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