



Weekly Briefing

Serbia External Relations briefing:

A great power game: Serbia's foreign policy in the summer of 2018

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A great power game: Serbia's foreign policy in the summer of 2018

During the summer of 2018, Serbia led very mobile foreign policy, primarily oriented towards the great powers, with hope to improve its international standing ahead of solving important political issues. It achieved some important success in relations with Russia and China, while with the United States it found itself in a temptation to accept Washington's offer to improve relations at a huge price of concluding still bad solution for Kosovo and turning its back on Russia. So far, Serbia's government has resisted this temptation, albeit all worries are not removed, especially due to behavior of some circles inside Belgrade governing elite.

The summer of 2018 brought very agile foreign policy of Belgrade, with an emphasis on relations with the great powers: the United States, Russia, and China. The objective was to improve Serbia's political and economic position in international relations, ahead of solving some of the important national, regional and international hot issues. The achieved results are limited, albeit significant, while the process is still ongoing.

Interesting fresh moments emerged when it comes to US-Serbian relations. The occasion which prompted both sides to talk about the possibility of their improvement was the hundredth anniversary of the certain event during World War I, when Serbian flag was raised on the White House in Washington. Serbia and the US were allied at the time, and the question came up – could something similar happen again? The celebration of the anniversary was accompanied with the high-budget video launched by US embassy in Belgrade, in which friendly relations between the two countries, alongside with personal friendship of then US president Wilson and Serbian-American scientist Michael Idvorsky Pupin were underlined. It seemed like Washington had some real intentions of fashioning relations with Belgrade in a different manner than it used to do, while

it appeared certain that Serbian government took this possibility seriously. As Kosovo issue is as always the first and inevitable test, the US for the first time after the province's self-proclaimed independence ten years ago hinted that it could consider some concessions to Serbia – including territorial ones – on its path of reckoning with this as the final solution. This seemed to be in line with Belgrade's wish to achieve a compromise on Kosovo, which has been the topic number one in Serbian both internal politics and foreign policy since president Vučić launched the internal dialogue on Kosovo in the summer of 2017.

However, several huge problems with this line of thinking had been already present at the start of talking about US-Serbian relations improvement, while some appeared during the process. Let us compress them in two. It never became clear whether Serbian officials understood how false was the analogy between 1918 and 2018, due to a very different context and US foreign policies. In 1918 the US army fought in Europe to prevent Germany from achieving European hegemony, and it was natural for Washington to support a small country in the Balkans which was the first victim of German-led coalition. The US and Serbia had a common enemy – in Wilson's eyes, Germans were the bad guys, so Serbs were automatically the good ones. Since the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989, the United States has been leading a radically different policy – of not preventing some of the European powers to achieve hegemony, but of establishing its own. Serbs stood in the way, so they had to be smashed. Now Russia is in the way, and Serbia still doesn't want to side with the West in crusading against it – not even by condemning Moscow's actions, let alone imposing sanctions. Washington's 1918-2018 analogy is clear – may Serbs and Americans become allies again, against a new “common” enemy – Russia. While it is certain that there are strong Russophobic circles inside Serbia's political elite who push for this U-turn in Belgrade's foreign policy, president Vučić knows that democratic decision about this is impossible, given the majority of voters' Russophile orientation.

Another problem is with the Kosovo “carrot”. Washington is obviously frustrated with its project Kosovo staying out of the UN, so the least it could do is to offer Serbia something in return for Belgrade’s cessation of blocking Priština’s membership. But what it offers is simply not enough. A small piece of territory called North Kosovo, without guarantees for Serbs in its remaining part, without solving property issues, without ensuring any kind of Serbian influence in the province – is unacceptable for Serbia, at least if democratic decision is to be made over this issue also. Moreover, there have been rumors about the exchange of territories – so that Serbia would not only let Kosovo into the UN in return for its northern part, but also cede Preševo valley, which is at the moment in Central Serbia. No Serbian official explicitly denied exchange of territories is on the table, so this is the reason for most of Serbian public and the elite to worry. On the other hand, one Belgrade official, defense minister Aleksandar Vulin, mentioned that Serbia should delimit itself from “Greater Albania” – creation of which should be unacceptable for Serbia in any kind of Kosovo solution. There is also a naïve belief by parts of Serbian elite that with Kosovo solution all problems will be solved. After Kosovo, Washington would put Republic of Srpska on the table. And this is where Kosovo and Russia are connected in a new sinister strategy shared by Washington and some local pro-Western NGOs, such as the Center for Euro-Atlantic studies. Territorial concessions to Serbia should be given to make Kosovo solution possible, because after this solution Belgrade will not need Moscow’s support over Kosovo anymore. After it turns its back on Russia, Serbia will remain alone in solving Republic of Srpska issue which comes ahead.

So, if alliance of Serbia and the United States, which would not emerge at the expense of Serbian interests, is still not possible, Russia remains the most important Belgrade’s partner in keeping Kosovo conflict frozen, until some real concession by Albanians and their Western mentors are offered. Serbia’s foreign-political activity towards Russia this summer is promising, and it gives hope that Vučić and his associates are only bluffing the Americans all the time,

and are not ready to catch their bait so easily. President's trip to Moscow in May brought some important achievements in military cooperation, and this is still to be developed during autumn, when he will first travel there again, and the most important is yet to come – Putin's arrival to Belgrade to celebrate the World War I victory in November. Nevertheless, the most interesting moment in Serbia-Russia relations happened when Maria Zakharova, a Russian MFA spokesperson, visited Belgrade. When a journalist asked her whether Russia would support some kind of delimitation as a solution for Kosovo issue, she responded by question: "Would it be good for Serbia?" This proves Russia knows what is in Serbia's interest regarding Kosovo even better than some members of Serbian political elite do, and is willing to continue its support to Belgrade in preventing a bad solution.

Finally, the very end of the summer brought new and significant breakthroughs in economic cooperation with China. The visit of Serbian delegation to Beijing resulted in several huge deals, including the investment in Bor copper mining and smelting complex. It is beyond doubt, however it painful may be for the US, that China is rapidly advancing its economic presence in Eastern Europe. This summer Serbia affirmed itself as a hub of this Chinese endeavor.

All in all, it can be said that Serbia's recent high foreign-political activity got some results in strengthening the country's international position, mixed with the temptation to jump into US "booby trap" regarding Kosovo solution. If the government of Serbia resists this temptation, its leverage over this and other open political issues can only grow.

Conclusion

By an agile foreign policy towards the great powers during the summer of 2018, Serbia improved its international standing, and it can continue this process only if it resists temptation to get into a bad deal with the United States.