



Weekly Briefing

Bosnia-Herzegovina external relations briefing: Accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO

Ivica Bakota

Accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina to NATO

The start of NATO accession- overview

Thanks to favorable NATO enlargement policy and relative support the NATO accession enjoyed domestically, Bosnia and Herzegovina rather quickly passed the first steps towards NATO accession. In 2006, before the start of the accession negotiations, Bosnia and Herzegovina joined the Partnership for Peace program of NATO and signed an agreement on security cooperation in March 2007. In January 2008, Bosnia and Herzegovina began further cooperation within Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). After the 2008 Bucharest Summit, in September 2008, BIH intensified the accession efforts by officially signing IPAP (officially starting with NATO accession process), launching Intensified Dialogue and joining the Adriatic Charter, a threshold framework for NATO aspirants.

Expediency through which BIH started NATO accession path was paralleled with more active enlargement policy of NATO in the Western Balkans, accession of neighboring Croatia and Albania in 2009 and signing Membership Action Plan with Montenegro in December same year. Also, in the period following the sixth EU enlargement (Bulgaria and Romania), the dynamic of Euro-Atlantic integrations in the Western Balkans was largely perceived in complementary terms, where Atlantic (NATO) integration figured as necessary prerequisite for Euro integrations. It was a path followed by every country in the Western Balkans that far, so relative support NATO integrations enjoyed in the opinion polls rather reflected complaisance with the fact that NATO integration foregrounds the ultimate goal, i.e. Euro integrations. This Euro-Atlantic complementarity held that Euro integration is possible in a stable environment secured by trusted security framework, so a policy that every prospective EU member should first become NATO member was actively promoted by Brussels, conveniently figuring as metaphoric destination of the both integration processes, and the Big Four (EU4). In regional NATO aspiring countries, this complementarity has been translated into a norm and, if the legitimacy for joining NATO could not be drawn *sui generis*, the politicians would directly justify this cause through the EU integration means. Similarly, popular legitimacy for NATO accession strongly depended on Euro-Atlantic symbiosis. That opinion makers and polls relied on this fact becomes especially visible when the support from opinion polls is contrasted with relative low voter turnout on NATO referendums (in Croatia, for example).

Bosnia and Herzegovina was not estranged from this “norm” 10 years ago when its NATO integration aspirations was still in initial stage. In February 2009, after the first

suggestions that Bosnia and Herzegovina could join NATO already by 2011, BIH Defense Minister Selmo Cikotic presented some poll numbers that stated overwhelming support for NATO membership in the Federation (89%) and “insufficient, but with progressive tendency” in Srpska (44%). That Serbs might hold reservations for NATO integrations, at least due to the 1995 NATO bombing of Bosnian Serb Army and fraternal solidarity with Serbia for the 1999 NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, was a fact that was treated with diminishing significance.

On this wave, Bosnia and Herzegovina again in January 2009 confirmed interest for seeking a Membership Action Plan (MAP). According to expectations of the NATO Mission Office in Sarajevo, if necessary reforms in the defense area are met, BIH could join NATO within 2-3 years. While the country did not receive a MAP at the April 2009 Strasbourg summit, the US State Department promised to strongly back BIH accession to NATO. October 2009, Haris Silajdzic, the Bosniak Member of the Presidency, announced an official application for MAP and the next year (April 2010) NATO gave conditional consent for launching the MAP for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hereafter, BIH encounters the first problems that will virtually freeze NATO accession to date.

Current issues – recentralization (resolution of Defense property), anti-NATO sentiment, Srpska-Serbia alignment

Issues that attract controversy and impede NATO accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina can be boiled down to recentralization/ unitarization dispute between Sarajevo and Banja Luka, low-level popular support for NATO, and convergence with Serbia on military non-alignment and neutrality Srpska seeks to accomplish.

The conditional invitation to join the MAP in April 2010 specified that no Annual National Program would be launched until BIH fulfils the resolution of State Defense property, which is also one of the conditions for the OHR closure (Office of the High Representative). Specifically, MAP activation required the transfer of the registration of 63 military facilities from the local entity-level to the central government. The Federation mostly complied and as of April 2018, fully transferred 31 objects located within its territory. Citing concerns on creeping unitarization of BIH and drawing the popular support that has been previously charged with “forced” integration of RS Army into the BIH Armed Forces, Republika Srpska has opposed the move and holds that it constitutes infringement on its sovereignty. As of 2018, RS authorities defied demands to transfer the 23 properties located in its territory. The issue was reactivated only in 2016 when the Court of BIH ruled (and the Constitutional Court upheld the ruling in 2017) that the military facility in Han Pijesak (within RS territory) has to be transferred to the Bosnian government. Meanwhile - “if Muhammad will not come to the mountain, the

mountain will come to Mohammad” - in December 2018, NATO rescinded this condition, approved the activation of the MAP for Bosnia and Herzegovina and called on Bosnian government to submit an Annual National Program. Despite of this concession by NATO, all Defense property is not transferred to the central government, so unitarization dispute between Banja Luka and Sarajevo is only postponed for the future.

Generally, from the start of accession negotiations in 2008, through the 8 gap years the popular support for NATO is dissipating. However, this should not be surprising if it is taken into account that previous polls had complementarity bias. A Banja Luka based CZP conducted poll in August 2018 which indicated that only 56% of those polled support NATO membership, down from 70% in 2009, 37% were opposed and opt for military neutrality while 7% are in support of joining “other military alliances”. Even before breaking down these numbers on entities, support for military neutrality makes a “new entry” that is not only a substitute for the undecided population regarding the NATO membership. Also, there are some voices opposed to black and white depiction of NATO support, as it was seen recently in the reluctance by HDZ BIH to “force in” SNSD to accept NATO. The liberal and civic political parties, such as DF, are the most vocal political parties in favor of NATO membership. Anti-NATO and NATO-sceptic sentiment draws big support in Republika Srpska. Only 13% of RS citizens support NATO, while 11% are favoring “other alliances”, which in given circumstances means “strong” opposition to NATO. 76% supporters of neutrality make stable majority that would be difficult to engineer in a period to come.

The [NATO interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) in 1992 and 1995, the [NATO bombing of Yugoslavia](#) were all aggregated to a NATO opposing stance of Republika Srpska following Kosovo’s declaration of independence and Serbia’s consolidation of the policy of military neutrality. Partly as an attempt to form independent foreign policy and partly for securing a nationalist ticket, ruling SNSD and its leader Milorad Dodik sought convergence with Serbia in regard to NATO. Although Serbia aspire to join the European Union, Serbia opposes to Euro-Atlantic complementarity and seek to maintain military neutrality, joining neither NATO nor the [Collective Security Treaty Organization](#) (CSTO). With the first open pressures to expedite MAP activation, Republika Srpska decided to legitimize NATO-sceptic stance by threatening with NATO referendum and finally by passing a resolution in the RS Parliament (October 2017), which confirmed military neutrality of Republika Srpska. Thereafter, the resolution is a main legal instrument of Republika Srpska in deferring pressures from Sarajevo or other European countries in regard to NATO. Despite being considered as an “internal matter”, the resolution on military neutrality yields certain concessions from the

Western countries and for Serbia figures as an important lever in hedging the consequences of possible full recognition of Kosovo (joining the UN and other international organizations).

Main positions and prospects of BIH NATO accession

Current stance regarding the NATO membership reflect can be divided in four main positions advocated by BIH politicians and typically include: strong anti-NATO, anti-NATO pragmatic, strong pro-NATO and pro-NATO pragmatic positions.

Strong anti-NATO position advocates principled opposition to NATO integration, demands termination of negotiation dialogue with NATO and revoking of the current MAP status. As a non-negotiable and principled stance, it is not officially endorsed by any major political party. However, it threatens to erupt if the political cleavage on NATO issue, just like few years ago in Montenegro, becomes too sharp. Strong anti-NATO position is current among supporters of joining “other military alliances”, (Serb) nationalists and those broadly fit into “pro-referendum” umbrella, on political level it is espoused by Serb far-right political parties (Serb Democratic Party, Serbian Radical Party of Republika Srpska, etc).

Although frequently criticized for holding a strong anti-NATO position, Milorad Dodik, the main political figure in RS, Chairman of ruling SNSD and current Serb MoP, represents a stance that is better characterized as “anti-NATO pragmatic”. He opposes joining alliance and strongly defends the resolution of RS Parliament, but is open for negotiating a special status/ relation between BIH and NATO. Therefore, he didn’t rejected activation of MAP for BIH and promised to have constructive role in designing Annual National Program. Also, his opposition to Euro-Atlantic “complementarity norm” is not meant to seek dead-ends. As a matter of fact, judging from the recent meeting with the US ambassador (indicating possible thaw in the US-RS relations) his principled yet reaching approach in defining the BIH status left impression that more constructive argumentation of NATO side is desired to explain why the EU integrations cannot proceed without NATO integrations.

Strong pro-NATO stance not only “believes” in complementarity of EU-NATO integration goals, but holds that BIH cannot or hardly can sustain its security challenges without joining military alliance. This position has a vocal support in “civic” parties (Democratic Front, Our Party) and draws unprincipled support from some nationalist parties such as the Party of Democratic Action. The main objection that arrives from anti-NATO camp is that strong pro-NATO advocates tend to simply ignore anti-NATO arguments and dismiss any solution to NATO status short of full membership.

Between strong pro-NATO and anti-NATO pragmatic positions dwell “pro-NATO pragmatists”, highly volatile group whose members “temporarily” fit into this group and who would not necessarily admit to be as such. This is a position that seeks a dialogue (not necessarily reconciliation) between pro and contra positions and tends to use the issue for some immediate ends. Likewise, it is perceived more “pragmatic” than “pro-NATO” and its traits can be partly found in HDZ BIH strategy for seeking rapprochement with SNSD.

Given the current division between pro-NATO and anti-NATO positions, it is not difficult to imagine yet another political deadlock that would result from dominance of “strong” positions on NATO. However, big NATO countries that are so far giving full support to “strong pro-NATO” option might find that the same “strong” approach NATO has been pursuing in Montenegro and Macedonia not quite fits con-federal BIH, and give impetus for seeking “pragmatic” modalities for BIH relations with NATO.