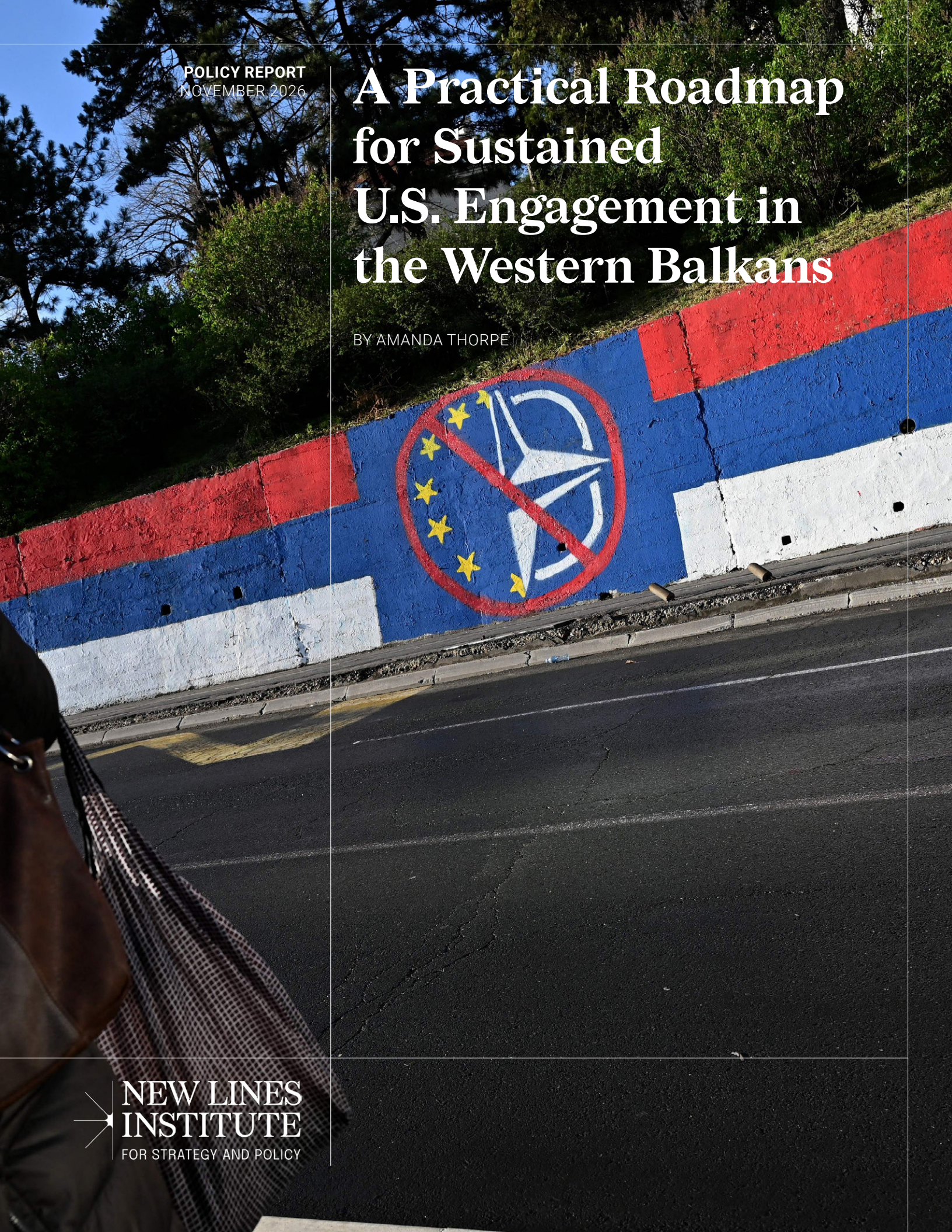


POLICY REPORT
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A Practical Roadmap for Sustained U.S. Engagement in the Western Balkans

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NEW LINES INSTITUTE
FOR STRATEGY AND POLICY

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COVER: A pedestrian walks past an anti-EU and anti-NATO mural painting in Belgrade on April 2, 2022. (Andrej Isakovic / AFP via Getty Images)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lingering governance challenges in the Western Balkans are significant enough to potentially plunge the entire region into tumult. While not a top regional priority, U.S. national interests are served and preserved in the Western Balkans by promoting sustained political and institutional engagement that prevents conflict. Promoting security in regions that are proximate to the core geographic zones of U.S. national interest – in this case, the Eurasian borderlands – has not been a permanent component of U.S. foreign policy.

Today, perhaps more so than at any point in the recent past, the global security and governance situation remains dangerous and fragile. The U.S. public and its elected officials appear at odds over the country's strategic trajectory. It is critical, then, for policymakers to identify deliberate actions that advance U.S. vital interests in a sustainable way. This requires a practical and actionable roadmap for sustained U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans.

Such a policy can be achieved in two ways: first by asserting U.S. security interest in Washington's approach to the region; and second by advancing broader stability and governance measures.

Policy Recommendations

1. PRIORITIZE ENGAGEMENT WITH THOSE WHO EXEMPLIFY ADHERENCE TO THE RULE OF LAW.

As a baseline, the U.S. should unequivocally amplify the message that preferred U.S. partners are countries, entities, and individuals that adhere to the rule of law, seek balanced government, engage constructively with their citizens, and protect minority rights.

2. PROMOTE STABILITY THROUGH INVESTMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH.

The U.S. must work through organizations like the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and with American Chambers of Commerce to secure the region's economic foundation. Encouraging prudent fiscal structures insulates against nefarious influence and creates permanent stability mechanisms.

3. FINISH THE PROMISE OF THE DAYTON PEACE AGREEMENT.

The U.S.-forged Dayton Peace Agreement was drafted and signed under duress as war-ravaged Sarajevo faced another winter. Understandably, the agreement was an important, but inelegant solution. Though Dayton was a categorical success as a narrowly defined peace agreement, it should not be allowed to define the ceiling of U.S. interests or Bosnian aspirations.



Aerial view of Sarajevo. (Naeblys / iStock / Getty Images)

Introduction

The Western Balkans boasts some of Europe's most beautiful topography. Both mountainous and coastal, this tiny region has historically been easier for outside powers to occupy than for governance managed from within. The 20th century saw Balkan lands and people conquered, partitioned, isolated, and then independent. In recent history, the Western Balkans have traveled an extraordinary distance from the catastrophic violence in the 1990s, but progress is not permanent, nor inevitable. There remains significant interest from Russia in keeping the Balkans in consort, or at the least in upheaval, preventing westward and transatlantic alignment.

The Western Balkans have successfully transitioned from one-party authoritarianism and violent conflict, which accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia, into a region developing the ability to export and contribute to European and global security. Still remaining governance challenges are significant enough to potentially plunge the entire region into tumult.

While not a top U.S. regional priority, the country's national interests are served and preserved in the Western Balkans by promoting sustained political and institutional engagement that prevents renewed regional conflict. Promoting security in regions which are proximate to the core geographic zones of U.S. national interest – in this case the Eurasian borderlands – has not been, but should be, a permanent component of U.S. foreign policy.

Today, perhaps more so than at any point in the recent past, the global security and governance situation remains dangerous and fragile. The U.S. public and elected officials themselves appear at odds over the country's strategic trajectory, as evidenced by the sharp rebuke of the war against in Iran by American voters during the recent midterm elections. It is critical, then, for policymakers to identify deliberate actions that advance U.S. vital interests in a sustainable way which is transcendent of party politics. This requires a practical and actionable roadmap for sustained U.S. engagement in the Western Balkans.

Such a policy can be achieved in two ways: first by asserting U.S. security interest in Washington's approach to the region, and second, by advancing broader stability and governance measures. The latter is key to making the region more attractive for U.S. investment and thus deepening durable engagement between the U.S government., U.S. industry, and local partners.

Assert Security Interests

The long-held stereotype about the Balkans as Europe's powder keg may be overstated but it alludes to an underlying instability which threatens yet another protracted European security crisis.

Significant unrest, in particular intra and inter-state conflict, in this tiny corner of Europe will not remain contained. The European Union will likely react to stabilize an internal regional security situation, and the United States' own economic stability would be significantly undermined by further shocks to European security, likely forcing Washington to engage to protect interest and equities. The U.S. must work to improve stability or risk being forced to react to violence.

U.S. policy should advance security interests in the Western Balkans in three ways. First, through expanding NATO to all southeastern Europe. Second, by promoting regional defense capabilities. And third, by aligning resources to mitigate external threats.

Expanding NATO

Three Western Balkan countries are not NATO members: Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. Washington, which has direct influence on NATO membership, should view membership for every Western Balkans country as a key objective supporting inclusion into the alliance based on each country's own sufficiency, security relevance, and suitability.

Kosovo

Kosovo is eager to meet NATO membership security obligations and commitments further bolstered by hundreds of U.S. troops stationed around the country via the Kosovo Force (KFOR). This is a militarily capable country with rapidly modernizing security posture,[1] including a nascent drone development program,[2] a longstanding partnership program with the Iowa National Guard, and numerous contributions to multi-national missions.

The U.S. should take a strong stance toward advancing Kosovo's NATO membership, especially as the cost of fraying alliance structures becomes more apparent. Kosovo is not a major contributor to burden-sharing in absolute terms, but U.S. advocacy on support for Kosovo may help assuage European allies and foster goodwill in the trans-Atlantic relationship, which categorically contributes to long-term Euro-Atlantic strategic and security interests.

Practically, this means that the U.S. must take an active role in Kosovo's inclusion in the Partnership for Peace (PfP), a program designed to help democratic states establish military forces and military doctrines, and structural requirements for NATO membership. Additionally, the Membership Action Plan obligated through the PfP is a technical preparation process that will further Kosovo's defense transformation through clear benchmarks, further enabling its security stability.

Only when Kosovo is included in the PfP on an irrevocable NATO membership trajectory and firmly ensconced within the broader Euro-Atlantic security and political architecture, should the U.S. troop contribution into KFOR be drawn down.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The pursuit of NATO membership has been enshrined in Bosnian national law since 2005 via the same legislation that created the country's unified armed forces. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) already has the required bureaucratic, and technical elements necessary for consideration[3] – it is already in the Membership Action Plan, and the state government has regularly submitted Annual National Programs (ANPs) to Brussels. Seemingly intractable political divisions stall BiH's advancement to NATO membership.

Those divisions could be dealt with through the adoption of relatively modest institutional and constitutional reforms such as insulating defense and security policy from the country's cumbersome veto mechanism with simple majorities in the state presidency or Council of Ministers.

U.S. advocacy for these constitutional reforms enables key U.S. security interests. By ensconcing BiH in NATO, the country which functions as the regional strategic pivot point,[4] the U.S. would permanently foreclose threats

1 de Briganti, Giovanni. Jan. 12, 2024. "US Approves $75 Million Sale of Javelin Missiles to Kosovo." Defense-Aerospace. https://www.defense-aerospace.com/us-approves-75-million-sale-of-javelin-missiles-to-kosovo/

2 Lisenbe, Alyssa. Jan. 15, 2026. "Preparing for Modern Threats: KFOR Advances Drone Defense Training," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service. https://www.dvidshub.net/news/556315/preparing-modern-threats-kfor-advances-drone-defense-training

3 Lefevre, Philippe and Diar Bala. June 8, 2026. "It's time for Bosnia and Herzegovina to join NATO." New Diplomacy Project. https://www.newdiplomacy.uk/articles/its-time-for-bosnia-join-nato

4 Ruge, Majda. July 21, 2021. "Six Principles to Guide EU Action in the Western Balkans." Istituto Affari Internazionali. https://www.iai.it/en/publications/c05/six-principles-guide-eu-action-western-balkans



Drone view of the Belgrade Western Gate Genex tower, New Belgrade district, Serbia. (Getty Images)

to the country's territorial integrity and remove BiH from the list of geopolitical flashpoints. NATO membership would not only take generational strides towards the region's pacification, but it would also remove pressure to obligate U.S. political, diplomatic, and military resources for other matters.

Serbia

Serbia could play a constructive role in Balkan regional defense. Its modest contributions to Ukrainian defense in the face of Russian aggression are an example of a positive step promoting regional stability.[5] Serbia should be considered for NATO membership after the country creates a pattern of productive actions supporting regional defense and demonstrated actions respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors.

Promoting Regional Defense

The U.S. should strengthen the Balkan defense industry, promote effective supply lines, and advance effective procurements for regional actors aligned with U.S. security goals. There are industries, strategic assets, and defense capability in numerous Western Balkan countries. Bosnia has a burgeoning munitions manufacturing sector outpacing the capacities of much larger European states.[6] Albania and Montenegro both offer strategically located ports along the Adriatic. North Macedonia boasts a decades-long state partnership program with the Vermont National Guard, home to the powerful U.S. Air Force F-35.[7]

The U.S. Congress should advance a comprehensive security package through

5 Russell, Alec and Marton Dunai. 2024. "Serbia turns a blind eye to its ammunition ending up in Ukraine." *Financial Times.* June 22, 2024. https://www.ft.com/content/136ed721-fd50-4815-8314-d9df8dc67fd6?syn-25a6b1a6=1.

6 Karčić, Harun. 2026. "Bosnia's Quiet Rearmament: How a Small Defense Industry Is Becoming Europe's Hidden Supplier." *Fair Observer*. January 24, 2026. https://www.fairobserver.com/business/bosnias-quiet-rearmament-how-a-small-defense-industry-is-becoming-europes-hidden-supplier/.

7 Vermont National Guard. Nd. "Vermont Air National Guard F-35A Lightning II Program". *Vermont National Guard.* https://vt.public.ng.mil/About/Our-Missions/F-35-Program/.

a Balkan Security Initiative. Such an initiative will deepen security cooperation with the lawful military forces of Balkan countries. This framework consisting of dedicated U.S. resources and partnerships has worked well with the Baltic states to connect U.S. defense interests to the regional capabilities, providing durable connections. With certain caveats and conditions, the Baltic Security Initiative should be used as a model for U.S. cooperation with the six Western Balkans countries.

Notwithstanding authentic cultural and religious connections, Russia's influence in the Western Balkans is malign and nefarious. In 2025 there were reportedly millions of dollars[8] funneled from Republika Srpska to DC lobbying efforts[9] to have patron and irredentist leaders removed from U.S. sanctions list. These successful efforts have allowed Republika Srpska leaders credence in their advocacy for Bosnia's territorial devolution against U.S. policy and to Russian advantage.

A Balkan Security initiative further deters malign influence by further implementing NATO's strategic concept strengthening the alliance's defense posture, enhancing regional cooperation among Balkan military forces, and aligning security cooperation with neighboring countries including Croatia, Greece, and Romania. Development for long-term regional capability projects including maritime domain awareness, land and special operations force development, cyber defense and resilience to hybrid threats should also be considered for inclusion in the Balkan Security Initiative.

Reconsidering Force Allocation

The 2026 Office of the Director of National Intelligence Annual Threat Assessment notes:

"Russia fuels instability between Serbia – which it favors – and Kosovo over Kosovo's statehood, and backs the separation of Serb entity Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia also uses state-sponsored nongovernmental entities to direct campaigns with the goal of obstructing NATO and the EU."[10]

The Balkans have already seen sustained engagement by the United States' major geopolitical rivals, chiefly Russian and China, which have established significant political, security, and commercial interests in the region. China may soon supplant both the U.S. and EU in terms of its overall presence in the regional civil society information spaces.

The Balkans, as a region, need a refreshed and detailed security assessment and allocation review. A report reviewing regional Russian and Chinese malign activities mandated by the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act[11] should be used by policymakers to adjust U.S. regional posture, and resource allocation.

It is important to draw the distinction between real threats and hollow application of religious zealotry. The claim, presently advanced by lobbyists in the employ of Banja Luka,[12] that Muslim actors in the region are actively fomenting violence against Christians is false, disingenuous, and dangerous. The region has a strong track record of pushing against extremists[13], Bosnian officials – including the leadership of the country's Islamic Community (the

8 Hodzic, Enes. July 31, 2026. "Bosnia's Mainly Serb Entity Ramps Up Lobbying Outlay under Trump." Balkan Insight. https://balkaninsight.com/2026/07/31/bosnias-mainly-serb-entity-ramps-up-lobbying-outlay-under-trump/bi/

9 Ruge, "Six Principles."

10 "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community." Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 1, 2026. https://archive.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2026-Unclassified-Report.pdf

11 H.R.5274/§.1909 Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act (2025)

12 Gerstein, Ben. April 21, 2026. "Bosnian Serb Secessionists Wield Islamophobia to Gain International Support for Their Cause." Just Security. https://www.justsecurity.org/136681/bosnia-serb-secession-islamophobia/

13 Tanja Jiries. *Balkan Fighters in the Syrian War*. (Routledge, 2021).

official governing body of the country's Muslim faithful) – were unequivocal in denouncing Islamic extremism[14] and worked directly with U.S. and European law enforcement to apprehend suspects and disrupt the flow of recruits to Daesh and other extremist groups.

Advancing Regional Stability

The situation in the Balkans is largely stable. More than half of its countries are NATO members, while two of the remaining three non-members have advanced relations with the Alliance. Montenegro is driving to become the 28th member of the European Union by 2028. By all economic indicators, the region is on a positive trajectory.[15] However, student protests in Serbia had been a perpetual feature of its domestic politics since 2024 and have now turned into electoral victory. Recent proposals to develop ecologically sensitive areas in Albania[16] have sparked protests not seen in Albania there for decades. BiH's persistent governance challenges exacerbated by the emboldened Republica Srpska leadership weigh heavily on the region's overall stability.

The most stable, prosperous, and flourishing Western Balkans countries are pluralistic and multi-ethnic. Montenegro shows that ethnic pluralism is not an impediment to effective governance,[17],[18] but rather a mechanism for advancement, a means conducive for investment, and a structure that enables prosperity and protection of minority rights.

On the other hand, undue secretarial power-sharing promotes dysfunction, enables corruption, and fosters instability. Ethnic administration of territory, property, utilities, or the law should be unequivocally avoided as this niche governance structure is untenable and precludes durable U.S. connection and investment.

At the extreme, as William Pfaff writes in his Foreign Affairs piece "Invitation to War," ethnic governance invites conflict:

"The idea of the ethnic nation thus is a permanent provocation to war. It is an idea that makes spies and prospective insurgents of those who have the misfortune to live outside the shifting frontiers incentivized with their nationality, inviting their persecution by the people among whom they live, and rationalizing national expansion by the governments to which they are ethnically attached."[19]

The U.S. seeks reliable development, business, and security partners,[20] not fragmented actors operating unilaterally and absent country consensus. Those interactions are fleeting and unreliable, open to question internally and challenged with U.S. political shifts. Durable connections appealing for U.S. collaboration share basic qualities: accountability and rationality in governance, administration, and the foundations to transcend beyond the cult of personality on both sides.

14 Pecanin, Dzeilana. March 30, 2017. "Bosnian Mufti Vows Continued Fight Against Extremists." Voice of America. https://www.voanews.com/a/bosnia-mufti-fight-against-extremists/3790410.html

15 World Bank. Oct. 27, 2026. "Western Balkans' Growth Set to Accelerate, With Lower Trade Costs Key to More Jobs." https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2026/10/27/western-balkans-growth-set-to-accelerate-with-lower-trade-costs-key-to-more-jobs

16 Xhabafti, Eri and Zana Cimili. Sept. 8, 2026. "Albanian protests against Kushner-linked coastal development turn violent after 100th day." Associated Press. https://apnews.com/article/albania-protest-kushner-trump-rama-a5fd528fe90f515ffe0f0712304c39a5

17 CDM. Sept. 9, 2019. "Montenegro is the most successful multi-ethnic country in the region." https://www.cdm.me/english/montenegro-is-the-most-successful-multi-ethnic-country-in-the-region/

18 Uljarević, Daliborka and Balša Božović. May 28, 2026. "Two Decades of Montenegro's Restored Independence - Between Statehood Success, Incomplete Democratization, and the European Endgame." Heinrich Böll Stiftung. https://ba.boell.org/en/2026/05/28/two-decades-montenegros-restored-independence-between-statehood-success-incomplete

19 Pfaff, William. "Invitation to War." *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 97–109. https://doi.org/10.2307/20045625.

20 U.S. State Department. May 2026. "Report to Congress on United States Policy to Promote Regional Stability and Prosperity in the Western Balkans." https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/United_States_Policy_to_Promote_Regional_Stability-Accessible-HRC1399683.pdf

Therefore, the U.S. must strengthen rational regional governance by engaging with those who adhere to the rule of law and promote transparent economic development. For BiH specifically, it must work to bring about constitutional reforms.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 PRIORITIZE ENGAGEMENT WITH THOSE WHO EXEMPLIFY ADHERENCE TO THE RULE OF LAW.

As a baseline, the U.S. should unequivocally amplify the message that preferred U.S. partners are countries, entities, and individuals that adhere to the rule of law, seek balanced government, engage constructively with their citizens, and protect minority rights. These countries have, will, and should benefit first from U.S. engagement, support, and investment.

The creation of Albania's Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) has highlighted a commitment to anti-corruption efforts as part of a reform agenda and serious EU accession path. The Albanian defense forces work closely with the U.S. to counter Iranian cyber activity and strengthen Albanian's defense, civil society, and democratic governance. Albania is a U.S. partner of choice because of its commitment to reform and modernization.

Regional irredentists and some international actors advocate further separation in the Balkans along ethnic lines or to redraw borders to calm ethnic tensions. This is imprudent and runs counter to codified U.S. policy which states that "the U.S. shall not propose any policy that advocates for land swaps, partition, or other forms of redrawing borders along ethnic lines as a means to arbitrate disputes between nation states in the region."[21]

A system such as Bosnia and Herzegovina's, or the so-called "association of Serb municipalities" in Kosovo, which creates an imprudent layer of ethnic administration, creates even more confusion in governance and partnership for the United States. A nation's duly elected federal government should speak for it with a single voice, negotiate international contracts and trade deals. and defend cooperation agreements. Carving up territory into enclaves or allowing autonomy in ethnic groupings does damage to the region and U.S. strategic interests.

The U.S. should work directly with the lawful security services of the region to protect the constitutional order, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of vulnerable regional polities.

The U.S. should expand partnership programs in the Balkans that strengthen the foundations of good governance and that increase business climate feasibility. Programs like the Department of Commerce's Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP) and the Department of Justice's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training (OPDAT) provide technical experts to advise and assist. Finally, the five-year Economic and Development Strategy envisioned in the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act will be key to facilitate future connection between the U.S. and the Balkans and should be prioritized in implementation for those countries who provide the most durable and rational U.S. investment.

21 H.R.5274/§.1909

2 PROMOTE STABILITY THROUGH INVESTMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The U.S. must work through organizations like the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and with American Chambers of Commerce to secure the region's economic foundation. Encouraging prudent fiscal structures insulates against nefarious influence and creates permanent stability mechanisms. Stabilization occurs by abiding by financial anti-money laundering and anti-trafficking standards required for expanded U.S. investment.

The DFC, the international investment arm of the U.S. government, partners with the private sector to "mobilize capital for strategic investments across the world" and is already investing in the Balkans. It secured a $5.18 million loan portfolio guarantee to a Bosnian bank expanding lending opportunities for small to medium enterprises for the more than 2 million Bosnian nationals living outside of the country.[22] The DFC also recently announced a supply chain resilience project in North Macedonia reviving a key antimony mine to bolster and diversify global antimony supply for U.S. and allies.

However, the DFC should open a regional Balkan office to manage, expand, and discover additional investment opportunities.

The investment climate is burgeoning. The European Investment Bank (EIB) opened an office in Podgorica, Montenegro, in 2025 signaling a major EIB regional commitment. The EIB also announced a €175 million euro commitment to modernize a key Montenegrin railway along Rail Route 4.[23] U.S. investors should take advantage of what is quickly becoming a bull market for regional economic development and growth.

Nonetheless, while the lure of opaque projects and fast contracts secured through political favor may seem appealing in the near term, the way to ensure a long-term return on investment is through transparent processes and the existence and adherence to a rule of law regime in host countries.

3 FINISH THE PROMISE OF THE DAYTON PEACE AGREEMENT

Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitutional framework is the Balkans' most acute example of an incoherent governance structure. It is simply impossible to expect rational actions from the current irrational structure, which must be reformed into a construct that enables effective governance and transparent processes.

The U.S.-forged Dayton Peace Agreement was drafted and signed under duress and pressure as war-ravaged Sarajevo faced another winter. Understandably, the agreement was an important, but inelegant solution.

Though Dayton was a categorical success as a narrowly defined peace agreement, it should not be allowed to define the ceiling of U.S. interests or Bosnian aspirations. At worst, Dayton created an illiberal, ethnically divided country which has kept Bosnia's government and her people largely separated along ethnic lines for the last 30 years. And by their own admission, U.S. architects of the agreement certainly never envisioned that it would survive three decades with virtually no structure amendments, precisely because they knew it would be insufficient as a long-term social contract and incapable of delivering on U.S. desires for decoupling from the Western Balkans.

Thus the U.S. should appoint a special envoy for Bosnian constitutional reforms to convene a working-level contact group, along with regional stakeholders and European leaders, with the aim of considering reforms. Civil

22 U.S. International Development Finance Corporation. "Expanding business opportunities in Bosnia and Herzegovina." https://www.dfc.gov/investment-story/expanding-business-opportunities-bosnia-and-herzegovina

23 European Investment Bank. Dec. 29, 2025. "Montenegro: European Union to invest €175 million to upgrade Bar-Golubovci railway line." https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2025-556-european-union-to-invest-eur175-million-to-upgrade-bar-golubovci-railway-line

society and expert groups have proposed a variety of models[24],[25] that can be used as plausible starting points acceptable to all major political actors and advance U.S. strategic interests in the country and the region.

Targeted and sustained U.S. involvement can assist in the formulation of a constitutional regime that would enable Bosnia and Herzegovina's entry into NATO by 2035 and create a realistic pathway toward the country's EU aspirations.[26] This can be done while realizing all the outstanding rulings of the European Court of Human Rights and the opinions of the Venice Commission and still preserving the country's institutional unity and multiethnic character. The only practical path forward is to cement Bosnia as a secular, democratic state. It is time for the U.S. to work with Bosnians and finish what was started in Ohio.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans are extraordinarily far from the catastrophic violence of the 1990s, but progress is neither permanent nor inevitable. The difference between a stable Balkans, which advances U.S. national security interests in Europe, and a volatile Balkans, which undermines them and depletes already strained U.S. and allied political and material resources, comes down, fundamentally, to the quality of local governance.

Where rational, accountable institutions have taken root, the region has flourished and become a reliable partner for U.S. strategic interests. Where ethnically administered dysfunction persists, where veto mechanisms substitute for democratic debate, and where parochial actors can hold national progress hostage, the region remains vulnerable to the malign influence of Russia and China, resistant to meaningful investment, and incapable of delivering on the security commitments that NATO membership demands. In other words, no amount of U.S. diplomatic energy or defense cooperation can circumvent the absence of rational governance at the local level. U.S. demands for the rationalization of local democratic regimes are therefore indispensable to every other element of this roadmap (i.e., NATO enlargement, the Balkan Security Initiative, constitutional reform).

This is why finishing the work of Dayton, for instance, is not merely a favor to Bosnians, no more than U.S. assistance toward the full integration of Kosovo into the European political order. It is a direct U.S. security interest. What Washington requires here is a region in which all states are governed rationally, its regimes are accountable to its citizens and to the rule of law, and in which every state can be a relevant and contributing partner to the United States' strategic posture and interests on the continent. In short, a region that generates its own stability rather than perpetually consuming American resources to maintain it.

The sustained engagement required to achieve these objectives, however, does not require that the Western Balkans dominate Washington's agenda. It requires the political will to insist, consistently and across administrations, that rational, democratic governance and the rule of law is the price of partnership,

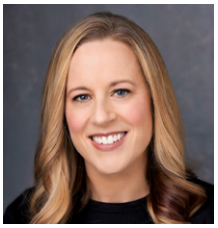
24 Mujanović, Jasmin. Feb. 20, 2025. "Dayton Plus: A Policymaker's Guide to Constitutional Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina." New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy. https://newlinesinstitute.org/western-balkans-center/dayton-plus-a-policymakers-guide-to-constitutional-reform-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/

25 Koalicija 143. "K-143 Municipalization Model: A Basic Primer in Q and A." https://www.congress.gov/115/meeting/house/108176/documents/HHRG-115-FA14-20180418-SD006.pdf

26 Mujanović, Jasmin. April 24, 2026. "A New High Representative and Grand Bargain for Bosnia." Odgovor. https://odgovor.ba/article/15115/

and that the full benefits of U.S. support flow to those who meet that standard. The countries of the Western Balkans have shown they can rise to that challenge when the U.S. leads with clarity. The investment on Washington's part is modest. The return, however, is significant: a self-sustaining, secure, and democratic Western Balkans that closes the door on Russian and Chinese co-option, denying Moscow and Beijing a southeastern European front.

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