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Albanian and British vehicles take part in NATO's "Brilliant Jump" military exercises in February 2024 in Poland.

Albania Redefined: NATO and the Security Architecture Shaping Tirana's Foreign Policy

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In recent years, Albania has adopted a more proactive attitude in its foreign policy, exemplified both by the holding of leadership roles in multilateral initiatives and organizations and an increased contribution to regional dialogue and cooperation. In many ways, this momentum can be traced back to 2009, when the country officially became a NATO member. Since then, Albania has increasingly played an important role in the security environment of the Western Balkans. This essay highlights the pillars and transformation of Albania's foreign policy, explores how its membership in NATO aligns with its foreign policy in the last decade, and evaluates its overall role in enhancing security and regional cooperation in the Balkans.

NATO Membership as a Pillar of Albania's Security Posture

While NATO membership has broadly shaped the security landscape for most countries in the Balkans, for Albania it has been the most transformative development in its realignment with the Euro-Atlantic community after almost 45 years of anti-Western sentiment and international isolation. Today, NATO has not only redefined Albania's security and foreign policy orientation but also serves as an anchor of stability.

Surrounded by other NATO allies and Kosovo – which has a predominantly ethnic Albanian population and a

strong NATO presence – Albania benefits both directly and indirectly from NATO’s influence and footprint. The alliance’s presence contributes to a more secure environment, deters regional conflicts, and has paved the way for greater cooperation among the neighboring countries, extending beyond security issues.

Since joining NATO in 2009, Albania has undertaken military reforms to align its defense capabilities with NATO standards. During these years, successive governments have invested in modernizing the military, improving its defense capabilities, and aligning with the alliance’s spending requirements.

Albania has shown significant growth in its defense expenditures, particularly in recent years. Albania’s defense expenditures as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) increased¹ from 1.35% in 2014 to an estimated 2.03% in 2024. This represents a substantial increase in the defense budget and an alignment with NATO’s guideline of spending 2% of GDP on defense. In absolute terms, the total expenditures on Albanian defense rose from \$150 million in 2014 to an estimated \$309 million in 2024, representing a real change of 106.27% over the decade.

At the same time, Albania has actively participated in NATO missions over the years. During the war in Afghanistan, Albania contributed troops to the Resolute Support Mission.² Similarly, Albania has taken part in NATO’s noncombat advisory mission in Iraq, focused on building more effective security institutions and combating terrorism, as well in the multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria³ and Estonia,⁴ an important element of the alliance’s deterrence posture on its eastern flank. Most importantly, in the regional context, Albania contributes troops to peacekeeping operations through the NATO Mission in Kosovo.⁵

Albania’s Growing Contribution in NATO

As a small country with a still-underdeveloped economy compared with its European peers, Albania’s direct contribution to the alliance, in terms of both financing and troops, is limited. Moreover, the fact that Albania is itself surrounded by NATO allies and Kosovo makes it less appealing for the country and its citizens to exponentially increase defense spending or expand its armed forces.

Therefore, to contribute to NATO, Albania has prioritized participating in alliance missions and exercises, enhancing interoperability with NATO forces, and contributing indirectly to the alliance’s logistical and operational capabilities. In 2018, this contribution was acknowledged by then-U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who said Albania “punches above its weight.”⁶

The most important success on this end was the reopening of the Kuçova airbase,⁷ with \$50 million in funding from NATO, to serve the alliance’s air operations. The airbase, a communist-era relic, faced significant infrastructural amortization after the fall of communism. Modernizing the airbase and making it fully functional again was a high priority for the Albanian government in its efforts to strengthen its role and security position in the Balkan and Mediterranean region.

The Albanian government has similarly invited the alliance to either build a NATO naval base or modernize one of the existing structures and adapt it to the needs of the organization. This invitation was reiterated by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in the opening ceremony of the Kuçova base in March 2024. Initially, the existing Pashaliman naval base in Vlora, another base dating back to the communist era, was proposed, with Porto Romano near Durrës mentioned as a potential later option.⁸

What the Kuçova airbase and the proposed naval base show is Tirana’s inclination to leverage its geographic location and geopolitical situation to bring added value to and strengthen its role within NATO.

This approach is complemented by the fact that the country’s territory has become an important component of NATO’s large-scale joint military exercises. Since 2021, Albania has become an integral host of the Defender-Europe exercises, an annual U.S. Army-led multinational event focused on building operational readiness and interoperability among NATO allies. The 2024 edition represented one of the largest military drills in the Western Balkans since World War II.⁹ These exercises have also served to highlight the continued and growing military partnership between Albania and the United States.

Path Toward EU Accession

Membership in NATO was one of two strategic objectives for Albania’s political leaders after the fall of communism. The other one, accession to the European Union, remains a work in progress.

Albania was granted EU candidate status in June 2014, and it officially opened accession negotiations in 2020, with the first EU-Albania intergovernmental conference held in July 2022. However, an unjustified unilateral veto from Greece blocked Albania from opening its first cluster of negotiating chapters until October 2024.¹⁰

Albania’s pace of institutional reforms, underdeveloped economy, and persistent systemic issues such as corruption have slowed its EU integration. The EU also

has wavered in recent years on the issue of enlargement after the Great Recession and the 2015 migration crisis. Countries such as France insisted that the union reform itself as well as the accession process before allowing other candidate countries to become full members, and Paris vetoed Albania's and North Macedonia's opening of accession talks in 2019.¹¹

While support for enlargement has received some traction recently, there are still questions as to whether EU members have the political will to ultimately add the remaining countries in the Balkans as full-fledged members. Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have similarly been left in limbo.

Champion of Regional Cooperation?

Faced with an evolving European security landscape, and with the prospects of an uncertain path to full EU membership, Albania has calibrated its foreign policy to two main themes: regional integration and multilateralism.

Albania has made significant strides in improving diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. These efforts include bilateral security agreements and collaborative initiatives, especially under the auspices of European Union integration. To mitigate the negative effects of the EU's lack of clarity concerning enlargement, Brussels has adopted a policy focused on deeper economic integration between the six Balkan countries that are still not members of the EU. This was the stated goal behind the Berlin Process launched by then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014.¹²

Albania was one of the early supporters of the initiative. The promise of enhanced connectivity, development, and cooperation was enticing, and it was in line with Albania's efforts to assert itself in the regional context. Moreover, the Berlin Process was touted as an initiative that could contribute to dialogue and reconciliation.

This situation aligned well with Albania's foreign policy mantra of having "zero issues with our neighbors." Tirana's thorniest relationship at the time was with Belgrade, after Serbia's ethnic cleansing campaign against Albanians in Kosovo in the 1990s and its intransigence toward Kosovo's independence. Considering the new political climate, immediately after the launch of the Berlin Process in November 2014, Rama visited Belgrade, the first time an Albanian leader had been to Serbia in 68 years, in an effort to usher in a thaw in relations between the two countries. The

visit, coupled with the European initiative, seemed to pave the way for peace and stability in the region.

When, after an initially promising start, the Berlin Process lost momentum, Albania teamed up with Serbia and North Macedonia to launch the "Open Balkan Initiative." Initiated as the "mini-Schengen" and later rebranded,¹³ the Open Balkan Initiative aimed to create a smaller version of the EU's border-free Schengen area. The European Union and member states were invited to participate but were not the driving force behind it.

The three founders of this new initiative argued that the platform would contribute to regional stability by promoting economic growth. Modeled as a regional economic zone, the foundational argument was that it would facilitate free movement of goods, services, people, and capital. Ultimately, by fostering economic integration, its proponents claimed that the initiative would help reduce tensions and increase political cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Rama's close relationship with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić paved the way for Albania to embrace a particular role in fostering close relations with Serbia. This was met with skepticism both in Albania and in Kosovo, considering the aggressive rhetoric and destabilizing actions Serbia continues to employ toward its southern neighbor. While Rama argued for the need to foster reconciliation and regional integration, Albania strategically aligned itself with the U.S. and EU prerogative of anchoring Serbia in the West. This approach was seen in both Washington and Brussels as a way to counter the potential of the Kremlin and other foreign players to exploit Serbia as their gateway to the Balkans. Unfortunately, this outcome has yet to materialize, given Belgrade's close cooperation with Moscow and its growing economic and political ties with Beijing.

The Open Balkan Initiative ultimately fizzled. The other three non-EU members of the region – Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro – were skeptical about Serbia's dominance within the initiative and refused to join it. Without EU safeguards and tools to guarantee economic convergence, they feared that Serbia would exploit its position as the larger market and stronger economy. They also questioned Serbia's political intentions behind the initiative, particularly given Belgrade's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence and its repeated challenges to the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Interestingly, it was Rama who effectively marked its end in July 2023, stating that the initiative had fulfilled its mission.¹⁴

Pitching to Become a Regional Diplomatic Hub

In the last few years, Albania has elevated its profile diplomatically and has showcased an eagerness for a more involved role in international affairs.

In January 2021, Albania offered to host diplomatic talks between Greece and Türkiye over the lingering tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁵ Türkiye's then-foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, stated that he was open to considering Rama's invitation to meet with his Greek counterpart in Tirana. The fact that both Türkiye and Greece are treaty allies as members of NATO made the situation quite complex, and the two countries' representatives eventually met, but it was not in the Albanian capital. Nevertheless, the tentative invitation marked the first time Albania tried to facilitate talks between two powerful regional actors and help address the situation, which risked spiraling toward an international crisis.

In March 2022, Tirana hosted the EU-Western Balkans Summit, marking the first time that such a meeting was organized outside an EU member country. The summit focused on the ongoing initiatives to deepen the partnership between the European Union and the Balkan countries, particularly on the investments under the EU's Economic and Investment Plan, with an emphasis on green and digital transitions and energy security. The decision of EU leaders to accept Albania's bid to host the event represented a recognition of its growing credibility and an alternative form of rewarding its efforts, given the lack of progress on EU accession.

Albania also hosted the Ukraine-Western Balkans Summit in February 2024 in Tirana,¹⁶ aimed at strengthening ties between Ukraine and the Balkan nations with a particular focus on unified responses to security threats posed by Russia. NATO's role was particularly evident in discussions about regional security and the threat of Russian aggression, which was expected considering that the alliance has been a key provider of military support and training to Kyiv. Another element that attracted much interest was the consideration about the positions and stability of non-member states like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, given the potential for Russian influence to destabilize the region.

The summit offered a prime opportunity for Albania to showcase regional leadership. Rama emphasized Albania's unwavering support for Ukraine and highlighted the broader implications of the war in Ukraine and the risk of Russia-induced destabilization spreading to other parts of Europe.

One of the summit's key outcomes was a reaffirmation by the Balkan leaders of their commitment to supporting Ukraine, potentially through joint initiatives, including discussions about joint arms and munitions production. In practice, critical challenges remain about the ability of the Balkan countries to be able to satisfy such requirements. Nevertheless, the gathering solidified Albania's role as an ally of Ukraine in the Balkans and demonstrated its ability to bring together regional players in the face of external threats.

Punching Above Its Diplomatic Weight

One of the most interesting developments for Albania in the last four years has been its increased visibility and boosted profile in international organizations.

In 2020, Albania served as the chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe for the first time in its history. This opportunity provided a platform for Albania's maturing diplomatic corps to prepare for another major undertaking.

At the meeting of the U.N. General Assembly on June 11, 2021, Albania was elected a nonpermanent member of the Security Council for the period 2022-2023. After a multiyear lobbying campaign and support from its American and European partners, Albania was selected as a consensual candidate of the Eastern European group. This was the first time since Albania had joined the United Nations in 1955 that it would hold a seat on the Security Council. Although the mandate began with some important priorities presented by the country's leadership and representatives – such as women, peace, and security; countering violent extremism; and climate and security – the outbreak of Russia's war in Ukraine disrupted its plans. While Albania continued to promote these priorities 2022-23, Russia's war in Ukraine dominated many of the Security Council's proceedings.

From the beginning of the conflict, Albania condemned Russia's invasion and expressed steadfast support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Albania fully aligned itself with NATO's response to the war and supported international sanctions against Moscow in line with the European Union's position. Importantly, as a nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council, Albania joined the United States in becoming a co-penholder on political issues in Ukraine and one of the most vocal supporters of accountability for war crimes committed during the conflict.

Equally important, Albania's election as a nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council for the 2022-2023 term allowed it to elevate in a global setting some sensitive issues

that affected the region. For instance, through its focus on women, peace, and security, Tirana was able to prioritize high-level discussions on conflict-related sexual violence.¹⁷ This opportunity shed light about some of the atrocities committed during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the associated long-term trauma.

Conclusion

Like other countries in the region, Albania faces significant domestic challenges. Its institutions are fragile, and respect for the rule of law remains problematic. Despite efforts to diversify its economy and promote itself as a new tourism hub, its economy remains underdeveloped, with one of the lowest GDPs per capita in Europe. Corruption is still endemic, and the extensive judicial reform that began in 2016, with U.S. and EU support, has yet to show its full impact.

Additionally, the country faces an important demographic challenge, with more and more people, especially those in younger generations, moving to Western Europe and the United States for better employment, health care, education, and financial opportunities. However, while these challenges are common across the region, Albania operates in a generally good security environment and has been able to adopt a constructive and proactive foreign policy.

Albania's membership in NATO has significantly enhanced its role in the Western Balkans security architecture and has provided the necessary stability to pursue a relaxed foreign policy centered on international cooperation and dialogue. Through military modernization, active participation in NATO missions, regional cooperation, and strengthened diplomatic ties, Albania contributes to regional stability and security.

As mentioned above, Albania's military role in NATO has natural limits. Therefore, the growth in capabilities for the Albanian armed forces could be prioritized toward specialization in areas such as disaster response, humanitarian support, and other crisis management operations. Considering the challenges faced by Albania, Greece, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and other countries in the region, these capabilities would be beneficial to all.

Russia's war in Ukraine has heightened security risks for the broader region. Albania's attitude toward potential Russian spoilers in the region, such as Serbia's current political leadership, remains ambiguous. Nevertheless, this ambiguity offers the opportunity to continue serving as a bridge on multiple issues concerning the region, whether at the security level or on political and economic matters.



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