



U.S. president Joe Biden appears on screen in Pristina, Kosovo, on Aug. 1, 2021, to accept an award from the president of Kosovo on behalf of his late son Beau Biden for his work to strengthen the country's justice system. (Armend Nimani / AFP via Getty Images)

U.S. Policy on the Balkans Under Biden: Accommodating Nationalist Hegemons for Managerial Simplicity

Kurt W. Bassuener

The Western Balkans – that is, the countries of the former Yugoslavia that remain outside the European Union, plus Albania – are as unsettled now as they were 22 years ago, when U.S. and EU joint efforts brought the final war in a decade of wars to a close in what is now North Macedonia. In some fundamentals, the region is considerably less stable and secure than it was then, given the tectonic shifts that have occurred since. People of the region demonstrate their lack of faith in their governments and a future in the countries of their

birth by [emigrating at an ever-accelerating pace](#). This is readily evident in the hinterlands of these countries and is palpable in their capitals and major cities.

More visible was the recent violence in northern Kosovo over the seating of elected mayors, in which [NATO troops were injured in violence](#) that appeared organized and coordinated, leading to suspicion of Belgrade's role. The U.S. and EU response, however, laid the blame squarely on Pristina rather than Belgrade. Meanwhile, in Belgrade, [two months](#)



[of popular demonstrations](#) were precipitated by outrage at a government that was too paranoid and self-absorbed to recognize a need for both a human and policy response to [a pair of mass shootings the likes of which Serbia had never before seen](#). As is often the case, demonstrators raised their sights from merely seeking a decent response from the government to calling for the end of President Aleksandar Vučić's regime altogether. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Bosnian Serb separatist leadership under the entity president, Milorad Dodik, has further escalated its [challenge to the state's very existence](#) soon after the U.S. had pressed for changes to electoral rules and structures to benefit the nationalist party backed fully by EU and NATO member Croatia.

Regionwide, those with unfulfilled nationalist agendas, be they separatist or hegemonic, have greater momentum and self-confidence than they have had since those same agendas were pursued with armed violence. Even worse, not only are some cloaking these irredentist actions in the language of democracy, but [those people in the region who want to live in societies based on the West's proclaimed liberal values see that their capitals and leadership are on the side of illiberals and autocrats](#).

The current dynamics playing out in the above-mentioned countries and in the rest of the Western Balkans (also including Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia) all have numerous drivers. But among them – often critically – has been the disposition of Washington. This demonstrates a depth of moral resignation and often outright cynicism that are utterly incongruent with the themes of restoring American leadership and upholding democratic values (seen as failing most glaringly in the two Summits for Democracy, capped off by the courting of India's illiberal prime minister, Narendra Modi) – oddly, in keeping with the transactionalism of the Trump administration, though now with the more values-forward marketing of the Biden administration. Paradoxically, this has become particularly evident since the start of Russia's full-scale attempt to subjugate Ukraine, which has precipitated the greatest transatlantic unity in the post-Cold War era, replete with Europe's recognition of the need for U.S. security guarantees and declarative commitments to democracy and human dignity. How did we get here?

Aborted Transfer and Malign Neglect

Throughout the more than 30 years since the first of five post-Yugoslav wars began in 1991, the United States' default setting has amounted to, "Europe should be able to handle this." Deviation from this posture began with America first brokering the Washington Agreement in 1994 to create a marriage of convenience between the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and BiH Croat military forces against the Serb forces, which led to it brokering the Dayton Accords, which ended the war in Bosnia in late 1995. American values-based engagement reached its apogee in the Clinton administration's second term, with and in the aftermath of NATO's 78-day bombing campaign of Serbia over its crackdown in Kosovo.

Altogether, the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslav space left approximately 130,000 dead. Together with the wars, genocides, and mass human rights crimes in the same decade in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Timor-Leste, the policy failure experience in the Balkans constituted a steep learning curve. One result was the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) concept – that people whose governments could or would not protect them from gross violations of human rights nonetheless needed to be protected. Unfortunately, this was soon followed by 9/11 and the "global war on terror," which subordinated values but also cast a pall over U.S.-led military intervention more broadly.

The incoming George W. Bush administration took its time to directly engage in confronting the challenge of an insurgency in Macedonia. The U.S. and EU jointly brokered an end to that conflict – the Ohrid Framework Agreement – before it metastasized further. The U.S. strongly backed international High Representative Paddy Ashdown in his state-building efforts and his efforts to forge an accommodation that would obtain Serbia's acceptance of Kosovo's independence, as well as ultimately backing its declaration of independence in 2008 when those efforts, embodied in the Ahtisaari Plan, were rejected by Belgrade.

But the reflex remained strong to leave the political lead to the European Union, whose Common Foreign and Security Policy was heavily influenced by the Union's disunity and resulting ineffectuality in the 1990s. The door to EU and NATO membership opened





German Chancellor Olaf Scholz addresses journalists during a press conference following the EU Western Balkans Summit in Tirana on Dec. 6, 2022. European Union and Balkan leaders met in Tirana to discuss closer ties as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reinvigorated the bloc's push for expansion. The summit included Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. (Ludovic Marin / AFP via Getty Images)

in 1999, in the immediate aftermath of the Kosovo war. The successful EU 2004 enlargement (which coincided with NATO's enlargement) led to a widespread confidence that the "pull of Brussels" would impel the region to progress toward democratic norms and standards. The EU's self-confidence in its ["normative power"](#) was at a zenith. The prevailing mood regionally circa 2005 was optimism. This also coincided temporally with transatlantic (and intra-EU) frictions over the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the growing draw on military resources in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The American will to cede leadership in the region to the EU dovetailed with the latter's desire to demonstrate

its capability to act. The result was the U.S. shifting regionwide to a supporting role to the EU's lead.

The cracks in the presumptions made at the time quickly made themselves felt regionwide. In Bosnia, the process of state strengthening came to an abrupt halt. The current Republika Srpska entity president, Milorad Dodik, soon after attaining office as prime minister in early 2006, [began to speak of holding a referendum](#) – letting the listener fill in the blank of the implication that it would be on independence. As a result, plans to close the Office of the High Representative were shifted from a target date to



[a set of criteria and conditions \(the “5+2”\) in 2008. But the undergirding idea for the policy that was locked in at the height of optimism – that the EU enlargement process, which relies on self-propulsion by aspirant members, would incentivize organic and society-wide progress – remained unchanged. This was based on the presumption that leaders were representative and accountable – and genuinely wanted to join, true in the case of 2004 calls for Central and Eastern European countries that subsequently became headaches for EU members, like Hungary and Poland. To this day, the EU has yet to honestly assess the results, let alone adjust its approach. For most of the past two decades, U.S. policymakers and implementers have been fellow travelers on this path, sometimes gritting their teeth. This constitutes a bipartisan policy failure, spanning the Bush and Obama administrations.](#)

Five years ago, the Trump administration [expressed openness to a policy hatched by Vučić and then-Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi](#) to partition Kosovo along the Ibar River – variously termed “border correction,” “land swap,” or “moving the administrative line,” depending on one’s perspective. Then-EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini adopted the idea, generating vocal objection from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and deep misgivings on the part of many other less vocal member states. Partly in pursuit of a foreign policy accomplishment, without a doubt sweetened by the idea of confounding Merkel (against whom Trump’s instincts as a transatlanticist spoiler and misogynist melded), Trump’s then-ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, [embraced pursuit of a deal between Serbia and Kosovo](#).

The Trump administration, following the EU’s External Action Service, broke with a decade and a half of the boilerplate, standard Western practice of not countenancing questioning of the existing borders of the former Yugoslav republics. In the end, the result, two years down the line, was economic arrangements without the central element: partition. The rest of the region, to the relief of many, remained largely off the radar of Trump himself. Montenegro and North Macedonia joined the alliance in 2017 and 2020, respectively. However, the malleability of Western policy had been made clear, and the unsated appetites of regional elites returned to the fore.

Early Hopes for a Reset

President Joe Biden’s avowed reason for running for president was the damage that the Trump presidency was evidently doing to the country’s social fabric and the democratic institutions of government, as well as U.S. global relationships. This engendered hope in many policy critics, including this author, that a Biden administration would offer opportunity for a reset, beginning with a full-spectrum policy review undertaken in coordination with transatlantic partners. A policy recalibration in the Western Balkans in line with the incoming administration’s focus on reconstructing alliances, defending and reviving democracy, and fighting corruption seemed eminently possible. The coincidence of the 25th anniversary of the Dayton Accords in November 2020 [provided the opportunity](#) to attempt to inform such a policy.

Initial indications gave cause for hope. After being confirmed, [Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s opening speech](#) laid out the administration’s priorities. He invited citizens to “check our work – to see the links between what we’re doing around the world and the goals and values” according to the framework he presented.

The critique that follows constitutes precisely such a midterm report card on the Biden-Blinken foreign policy in a region where the U.S., the EU, and the wider democratic West have had a predominant influence and extraordinary levers of influence for almost a quarter century. It is not an edifying picture of defending values and interests. Worse yet, Blinken himself, in addition to a host of senior officials serving under him, have the professional pedigrees and experience to know better.

Foreswearing Progress for Pacification

A number of elements in the Biden-Blinken policy became evident early on, not all of them directly related to the region, which did not augur well for the cause of democratic progress in the Western Balkans. The overarching focal point for Biden’s baseline foreign policy seemed to be addressing the challenge posed by China, with other regions, threats, and opportunities – even those closely related to China – relegated to



the sidelines. The chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 reflected this mindset, [as did the June 2021 Geneva Summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin](#). Biden's "America is back" slogan was undercut by the perception of many allies – [perhaps the United Kingdom most of all](#) – that they were not treated as allies and partners in the decision-making process precipitating the withdrawal. While none of these directly pertained to the Western Balkans, all these factors affected the regional dynamic – particularly the chaos and callousness of the scramble to leave before the 20th anniversary of the U.S. invasion.

The Biden-Blinken State Department's policy toward Bosnia provided the first obvious evidence that the regional policy not only did not reflect a fundamental rethinking but demonstrated continuity with the Trump administration's unabashedly transactional and amoral approach. At first jointly with the EU, [the U.S. pressed for a political deal to change the election law to accommodate demands by the local branch of the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union \(HDZ\) that governs in Croatia, which had boycotted the process of government formation in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – the larger of the country's two entities. The beta version of this arrangement was a deal concluded between the HDZ of Bosnia and Herzegovina \(HDZ BiH\) and the Bosniak nationalist Party for Democratic Action \(SDA\) in June 2020 on power allocation in Mostar](#), before the Biden administration took office.

When EU-U.S. talks with Bosnia's political parties failed to achieve an agreement, the U.S. pushed international High Representative Christian Schmidt to amend the election law and the Federation's constitution as soon as the polls closed for general elections on Oct. 2, 2022, to achieve the desired effect: to fulfill HDZ BiH demands that the rules magnify relative Croat (and, therefore, its own) power in the Houses of Peoples in the cantonal assemblies – and therefore transferring this amplified power to the Federation government and state-level governments. However, the applied changes boomeranged – actually giving the SDA the numbers to impede government formation in the manner that the HDZ had done during the previous term. In April, the High Representative imposed yet more changes to allow the Federation government, composed of the HDZ and the Trioka of the Social Democratic Party,

People and Justice (an SDA splinter party), and Our Party – which had governed Sarajevo Canton – to form. This constellation, with the addition of Dodik's Independent Union of Social Democrats, formed the state-level coalition government.

The rationale offered by U.S. officials was to "make the Federation work," thereby enabling both progress toward EU membership and an expected showdown with Dodik. This mindset was first on display [well over a decade ago](#) in the phrase "one state, two vibrant entities, three constituent peoples"; it remained a default setting for the State Department, which had sought "Federation reform" for years, failing to see the fundamental flaw in Dayton being the asymmetric structure of the country.

Yet the intervening decade saw a dissipation of a wider belief in progress – not just in the Western Balkans but also globally, at least in part due to the shattering of democratic self-confidence in many countries in the West (in the U.S. most theatrically). While two Summits for Democracy, in late 2021 and early 2023, were initiated by the Biden administration, one could not help but deduce that a central driver in what remained in its second iteration an unrealized policy frame was not assisting those undertaking democratic struggles globally, but rather the alignment of existing democracies – including those on a downward slide, like India – to confront both internal and external direct challenges – particularly from China, but also Russia. There is a logic to the latter focus, but it reflects a very different set of priorities – and criteria for identifying partners – from the former.

A mentality shift seems to have occurred in the past decade that the best that can be done is to manage crises and challenges, rather than undertake the harder task of attempting to resolve them. This defeatism seems reflected in the direction policy has taken under the Biden-Blinken State Department toward the Western Balkans. While the biographies of those engaged on the region, both in Washington and regional capitals, reflects a strong experience base, the sense of the possible once reflected in their prior engagement has clearly evaporated. The prevailing actuarial, conservative mindset appears to be based on the conclusion that the region is inherently and irredeemably tribal. Therefore, the best that can be



done is to manage within that framework. There is no reckoning with – let alone evident comprehensive strategy to address – the political economy that continues to prop up and feed these dynamics.

The attendant corollary to this approach is that those who persistently pursue nationalist and hegemonic agendas in and toward the region must be accommodated in some fashion so as to deconflict relations – and reduce U.S. policy bandwidth expenditures. Who are the prime beneficiaries of this policy? They are the countries with greater power, which had hegemonic agendas in the 1990s wars. First and foremost is Vučić's Serbia, with its [Srpski Svet \(Serbian World\)](#) de facto regional policy, an analog of [Russkiy Mir \(Russian World\)](#), which sees neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and of course Kosovo (which remains unrecognized by Belgrade) as areas of legitimate Serbian policy and ultimately dominance on account of ethnic Serb populations. But EU and NATO member Croatia also has hegemonic

designs on BiH – and has used its decade belonging to these clubs to pursue with increasing focus and energy its predatory ethnic agenda supporting HDZ BiH's efforts to further “confederalize” the country.

Washington seems to increasingly treat BiH as a Croatian-Serbian condominium. This angers both those BiH citizens who do not form-fit themselves into the “constituent peoples” boxes as well as those who identify as Bosniaks – generating considerable common frustration. In addition, though in a more minor key, the increased deference toward Belgrade and Zagreb (including Vučić's tendency to speak in terms of relations among peoples, not states, again reflecting the ideology of *Srpski Svet*), has whet the appetite of Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama to play the role of regional ethnic leader – a tendency that does not, however, seem to reflect a groundswell of irridentist ambition among his citizens. As a result, Albania is being affected by elite bad practice.



Police officers march in Sarajevo during a Jan. 9, 2023, ceremony marking the 31st anniversary of the foundation of *Republika Srpska*, the Bosnian Serb-dominated entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The creation of the entity, along with a referendum in favor of Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence from Yugoslavia – supported by Bosnian Muslims and Croats – triggered Bosnia's 1992–95 ethnic war that killed about 100,000 people. (Elvis Barukcic / AFP via Getty Images)



Cauterizing for Transfer: Showing the Europeans That Enlargement Is Not So Scary

U.S. officials questioned about the strategy of policy regularly deliver variations of a mantra of aspirations and destinations, not a strategy per se, as well as an argument that the policy is effectively unchanged from what had become a bipartisan standard since the close of the Kosovo war in 1999. These include the EU's integration of the region, NATO membership for those countries that want it (e.g., all but Serbia at the state level, but effectively BiH as well due to the Republika Srpska's ability to block), and ill-defined "regional reconciliation," as well as the rule of law – particularly the Biden administration's headline goal of the fight against corruption and promoting the investment climate. None of these in themselves is objectionable.

Yet the way, in particular, that "reconciliation" is being pursued demonstrates that something indeed has shifted since the mid-2000s. [Open Balkan, an initiative championed by Vučić and Rama, and presently including their countries plus North Macedonia](#), has been a contentious domestic political topic in both Montenegro and BiH – precisely because of Serbia's centrality in the plan. Kosovo, unrecognized by Serbia, is ostensibly invited. But absent the reciprocity in relations demanded by Kosovo's government, its entry seems highly unlikely. Open Balkan is also championed by the U.S. State Department (though not universally in its ranks or in the National Security Council) as potentially providing further economic connections and reduced trade frictions. But given Serbia's regional posture, it is perceived in [Podgorica, Pristina, and Sarajevo as the smiling economic face of the Srpski Svet agenda](#), itself a rebranding of the [1990s Greater Serbia vision](#). It is also often Exhibit A in what seems a Belgrade-centric regional policy. It also is seen in many European capitals – [including in the region](#) – as [contravening the already-existing Berlin Process](#). Further, by delinking democratic values from economic reforms, it is a purely economic proposition, which would give more financial ballast to unreformed governments. In July 2023, however, [Rama seems to have retreated from Open Balkan](#), emphasizing the Berlin Process instead. This also seems to have generated a gap between him and Vučić. So the future of Open Balkan remains to be seen.

More vividly, the frame of reconciliation envisaged by American officials seems to be embodied in what is called [the Ohrid Agreement](#) on normalization between Serbia and Kosovo, which was facilitated by the EU and individually agreed to by Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Vučić (with the EU, not each other) in March 2023. The arrangement has been fraught from its outset, focused on establishing the previously agreed-upon (in 2013) – but never defined – Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. This remains nebulous in its geometry, though [numerous proposals](#) have been [put forward](#); Kosovo insists on an association without executive character; Serbia wants precisely the opposite. [Clashes erupted in northern Kosovo](#) in late May, when Kosovo special police escorted legally elected mayors to their posts in Serb-majority municipalities that had boycotted elections (after [Serb personnel resigned](#) from Kosovo government service jobs last year). Numerous NATO Kosovo Force troops sent to intervene were injured by organized Serbs, mixed with local protesters, who attacked them with a variety of weapons, including explosive devices. In response, the U.S. and EU have effectively sanctioned Kosovo for "initiating" the series of events.

In testimony on Capitol Hill earlier in May, State Department Counselor Derek Chollet and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Gabriel Escobar repeatedly avoided criticism of Vučić's government, despite Chollet's averring that a brutally [graphic New York Times Magazine article](#) was accurate in the portrayal of the regime's links to ultranationalist networks and organized crime. There has been no frontal public criticism of Srpski Svet by U.S. officials; as recently as June, U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill referred to Vučić as a partner but questioned whether Kurti was. This was soon thereafter [clarified by Escobar](#). No American officials have addressed the [ongoing demonstrations in Serbia](#) against the Vučić government and the prevalent "culture of violence" precipitated by the official lack of response to two recent American-style mass shootings in early May.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Belgrade is so pivotal in the calculus of Washington that it is unwilling to take risks – even regarding central themes of the Biden foreign policy, such as [corruption](#) and [democracy](#). While some proffer that Serbian arms for



Ukraine (purchased by the U.S.) provide the rationale, the policy orientation predates Feb. 24, 2022. Bizarrely, given Vučić's business model of geopolitical arbitrage, his government's position vis-à-vis the West seems stronger than it was in early 2022 – despite there not having been a fundamental change in Serbian policy toward Moscow or the region. The idea, as one Capitol Hill staff member put it to this author in December 2022, of “moving Serbia” geopolitically seems to remain the grand prize in Washington's regional policy, despite the lack of evidence that this has ever worked. Russia's attack on Ukraine was an accelerant to an already-decided policy trajectory.

That policy seems to be a determination to address unfinished business in the Western Balkans by settling them, at least on an interim basis, in favor of the stronger parties by leaning on the weaker parties – a dynamic particularly evident now in Kosovo but also visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, which is being pressed to make constitutional amendments after Bulgaria impeded the launch of EU membership talks. Many in Montenegro also see the U.S. (and EU) accommodation of pro-Belgrade political forces, and fear the “Bosnianization” of their country. The aim of this [pacification](#) policy would seem to be facilitating and accelerating the EU's enlargement process so the U.S. can finally direct its energies elsewhere. Or, as one U.S. official put it to this author two years ago, it is “to show Europe that enlargement's not so scary.” Such a policy focus appears utterly incongruent with the actual likelihood of the countries of the region joining the Union without considerable demonstrated progress in adopting EU standards, including actual democratic practice.

The Impact on the Ground, and the Message It Sends Globally

The logic that Europe should be able to handle the challenges posed to securing durable peace, the rule of law, democratic standards, and human dignity in a region whose collective population, officially, is roughly that of the Netherlands, seems reasonable on its face. And yet there are 20 years of accumulated evidence that this is not the case – and with [a vector pointing backward for much of the region](#). The EU's enlargement theology, entrenched with the 2004 “big

bang” induction of members, includes the premise that its own soft power should drive progress toward its norms and membership – and, correspondingly, that postwar enforcement tools (e.g., the Office of the High Representative and the NATO-underwritten EU deterrent force, EUFOR, in Bosnia) are not only superfluous but actually harmful. When combined with a U.S. posture, determined in the Pentagon (and not countered from the commanding heights of the Biden administration), that the EU undertook a deterrent mission so it should take the lead in its reinforcement, this has led to a paralysis that serves the retrograde unfulfilled agendas in the region.

[The people of the region have taken onboard the message](#) of who constitutes the West's real partners: the leaders of these countries, regardless of their transgressions against democratic norms. Citizens are either along for the ride or can choose to exit. There was never a great deal of faith in the EU as a policy actor as such, but rather as a deep-pockets donor and a desirable address. In contrast to the EU, which believes it has credibility because of what it is, residual American credibility has hitherto been considerable, because of what it has previously done – in the 1990s and the first half of the subsequent decade. Its muscle and willingness to employ it undergirded postwar progress.

American moral and political credibility is presently being eviscerated in a region where the U.S. had the most sway and the deepest reservoir of practical and moral leverage, including vis-à-vis the EU. What's more, the U.S. is fast catching up to the EU in the public perception of its haplessness, as well as becoming unmoored from its declared values – and with the velocity of the effort and its deviation from prior expectations, it may be outdoing the EU in the real-time, popular perception of its cravenness and hypocrisy. It is hard to see how the current U.S. posture in the Western Balkans disadvantages Russia (or China, for that matter), let alone bolsters a foreign policy officially predicated on furtherance of democracy and fighting corruption, inter alia.

An Urgent Reset Is Required

At the time of this writing (mid-July 2023), there remains time to review and recalibrate a policy that





is failing to achieve the U.S.'s headline goals, let alone ensuring that renewed conflict at worst – and further regression and depopulation at best – will be prevented. The Western Balkans host a number of worrying dynamics, but also retain the potential to move forward – in each country – under conducive conditions. The U.S. and wider West cannot control all the internal and regional dynamics, but they can radically change the current incentive structure and sense of the possible for both leaders and citizens. This was understood to be the case 20 years ago – a time of relative optimism and progress in the region.

Despite the serious tension and recent violence in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the central conflict reactor in the Western Balkans. If citizens of the country felt secure and free from threats of return of violence, state dismemberment, or subjugation (by external or internal actors), then domestic and regional progress would once again be possible. The lack of will to credibly deter application of coercive force or defend the progress made in the state-building

period, primarily due to an EU-enlargement-defined approach, opened the door for internal destabilization and irridentist agendas in both Belgrade and Zagreb – and the former's appetite is not limited to BiH, as Montenegrins, Kosovars, and even North Macedonians can attest.

The first step in the regional reset must therefore be deployment of a sufficient deterrent force – preferably including U.S. forces, under NATO auspices – [beginning in Brčko, which is the circuit breaker of Republika Srpska's independence ambitions](#). The NATO summit in July 2023 not only failed to rise to the occasion, but a statement indicated [Croatia's continued ability to steer collective policy toward its nationalist aims in BiH](#).

Sooner or later, this trajectory will end in a bad place – in violence, with irreversible consequences. Washington continues to foreswear its leadership role in preventing such an eventuality.



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