

A Strategic Study of Serbia's East-West Strategic Balance: West or East?

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Abstract

Since ancient times, the Balkan Peninsula has been a key crossroads between Europe and Asia. Its strategic location at the junction of the Asia-Europe plate has made it a significant area of interest for geopolitical analysts. Serbia, situated at the center of the Balkan Peninsula, has a particularly important role to play in the Eurasian continent. Due to its unique geographical position, Serbia has been a focal point of contention between Eastern and Western civilizations since ancient times, resulting in a highly unstable situation. This has made Serbia acutely aware of the need for international cooperation in order to achieve economic and national growth. In the Western camp, Serbia is perceived as an “orientalized anomaly”; in the East, it is rarely acknowledged due to its relatively ordinary international status. Consequently, the choices of “eastward” and “westward” are of significant importance in the context of Serbia’s national strategy. Following the advent of the 21st century, China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative presented Serbia with an opportunity to enhance its comprehensive national power. This led to Serbia’s decision to pursue cooperation with China, a move that was influenced by Serbia’s domestic nationalism, which, given its identity as a “European country”, advocated active cooperation with Europe. In this context, Serbian nationalism, given its identity as a “European country”, advocates active cooperation with Europe. Therefore, the principal objective of this paper is to analyze the manner in which the Belt and Road Initiative and Serbia’s “eastward” and “westward” strategies are being promoted in Serbia from the perspective of public opinion.

Keywords

Belt and Road, Serbia, East, West, Opinion

1. Overview of the Background of the Study

The country of Serbia is situated in the center of the Balkan Peninsula in South-

east Europe, to the east of Romania, north of Hungary, west of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and south of Kosovo. Its border with North Macedonia and Albania encompasses the entirety of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as South-Eastern Europe. Serbia is also the gateway to Western Europe, and has been the first European country to embrace China's Belt and Road Initiative. Due to its geographical location in Europe, the Balkan Peninsula has been the site of intermittent wars since the 16th century. From the time the Ottoman Empire's iron hooves set foot in the Balkans, to the hot-blooded youths in Sarajevo who lit the fuse for World War I, to the civil war in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia since 1990, to NATO bombing intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999... Countless wars have taken place in the Balkans, which shows the importance of the Balkans in Eurasia. Serbia, situated at the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, has suffered greatly from these conflicts and is in urgent need of cooperation with other countries to achieve economic growth and national strength, as well as to maintain the normal functioning of the country. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has enhanced Serbia's comprehensive national power and strengthened its cooperation with China. Concurrently, while engaged in a cooperative relationship with China, Serbia has not relinquished its aspiration to join the European Union. Since 2012, when Serbia became a candidate for EU membership, it has consistently demonstrated its desire to join the EU, and at the same time, it is also interested in resolving the Kosovo issue through the EU. Consequently, the forces influencing public opinion in Serbia are divided into two distinct camps: one oriented towards the east (China) and the other oriented towards the west (EU). Consequently, it is imperative that contemporary scholars comprehend the manner in which political parties and major media outlets manipulate public opinion in order to influence Serbia's strategic decisions.

2. Going West: The Dilemma of Instability and Attempted Accession to the European Union

As a European country, Serbia has never given up the opportunity to join the European Union and, as a member of the European Union, to use the forces of Europe as a whole to resolve the country's turbulent situation. The complexity and arduousness of Serbia's transition stems from its unique history, geography and social development, and it is a "hasty march" carrying multiple tasks and objectives, which is destined to complete the double transformation of politics and economy, as well as to solve the problem of constructing a national state and the identity of the EU, and ultimately to realize the reconstruction of the country and rejuvenation of the nation, thus destined to have a twisting and turning course of transformation. The journey is bound to be a series of twists and turns (Chen, Wu, & Li, 2016). Since the birth of the Serbian state in the 10th century, it has been a place of contention for the great powers since ancient times because it is located in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula. From the Serbian Empire to Yugoslavia, and then to the Republic of Serbia after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the

dramatic changes in Eastern Europe, the country has been in the midst of intermittent wars. The many divisions of the country and the constant wars around the country made it more difficult for Serbia to complete its own social transformation, and at the same time, it needed other countries or international organizations to mediate the conflicts in the country. Accession to the European Union would be the ideal solution for Serbia to gain international status and resolve its national problems in the eyes of some of the opinion manipulating forces in Serbia.

In addition to the public opinion on Serbia's accession to the European Union expressed by the Serbian and other domestic media, the European Union also believes that Serbia should turn to Europe to accelerate the pace of "European integration" and achieve the autonomy of the whole of Europe, which is also helpful for the development of Serbia. According to statistics, from 2000 to 2013, Serbia received a total of 10.162 billion euros in international aid, of which 5.321 billion euros were concessional loans, with the European Union accounting for the largest share of foreign aid and becoming the largest donor (Zuo, 2014). Similarly, the Serbian Yugoslav nation perceives itself as a traditional European power. According to St. Sava, in a geopolitical sense, "Serbs are destined by fate to be in the East in the West, and in the West in the East, with no one but the heavenly Jerusalem!" (Ђурић, 1979) The above statement amply demonstrates that Serbia has been a traditional European power on a par with Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Austria since time immemorial, and that the "group behavior" of joining the European Union is a normal one.

As for why Serbia as a European country is not accepted by the European Union, the author believes that Serbia's own culture, religion and history have a strong degree of similarity, to a certain extent, can be called "the shadow of Russia", so from the perspective of the European Union, Serbia is a "youthful version of Russia", that Serbia should be and Orthodox civilization led by Russia as a faction; rather than Western civilization led by Britain, the United States, France and Germany. Therefore, from the perspective of the European Union, Serbia is a "youthful version of Russia" and is considered to be a part of the Orthodox civilization led by Russia rather than the Western civilization led by Britain, the United States, France and Germany. Thus, from a civilizational point of view, the EU's recognition of Serbia's civilization is minimal. This, coupled with the upheaval of the situation in Serbia after the dramatic changes in the Soviet Union, further proved that Serbia should follow the path of capitalism and liberalized market economy in Western countries. After the political, economic, socio-cultural upheavals, Serbian public opinion began to propagate the idea of cooperation with the European Union. In a sense, the stumbling block preventing Serbia from joining the EU is NATO. It is well known that almost the vast majority of EU member states are also NATO members, which means that Serbia's accession to the EU presupposes that it would be economically helpful only if it were to give in to the U.S.-dominated military organization. The result is a contradiction between Serbian identity and economic development, i.e., on the one hand, Serbia wants to join the EU to achieve economic growth, but on the

other hand, it wants to build an independent Serbian state identity, and this contradiction is the fundamental reason why Serbia's Europeanization process has been blocked. Instead of saying that Serbia wants to join the EU because of its recognition of European identity, it should be said that Serbia joins the EU for the sake of economy, and its real intention is to build the national identity of "European country with Slavic culture" and "Greater Serbianism", and to realize the double promotion of economy and identity. The real intention was to construct a national identity of "European state with Slavic culture" and "Greater Serbianism", and to realize both economic and status promotion. According to the above statements, Serbian public opinion is "going west" only for economic reasons. In fact, Serbia's cooperation with the EU is more pragmatic. Serbia's sense of belonging to Europe does not refer to the EU as in the case of Croatia, but to the whole European continent, including Eastern European countries, Russia and other non-EU countries (He, 2015). This is the real identity goal of the Serbian public opinion "going west". In reality, the Serbian political elite does not have great expectations from the EU in terms of policy-making. Although the Serbian political elite is nominally in favor of Serbia's accession to the EU, in reality, it is rather ambivalent. Moreover, the question of how to reconcile the EU identity with Russia's strong ethnic and cultural ties is a difficult one (He, 2015). Even if a Slavic country becomes a member of the EU and develops economically, it is almost impossible to re-establish its European identity as a country of belonging in such a situation. In addition to the fact that Kosovo is an unresolved issue in Serbia, Europeanization has been interpreted in Serbia in a way as cooperation with ICTY or loss of Kosovo. Serbian public opinion "goes west" in order to seek economic help from the EU and to build a European identity. Serbia's search for the best solution to the situation of instability, on the one hand, and economic growth and European identity through the EU, on the other hand, has not turned out well, as the attempted accession to the EU and the lack of a proper solution to the situation in the country have put Serbia in the dilemma of "going west" of the public opinion.

3. Going East: The Belt and Road Initiative: A New Chapter in Sino-Serbian Cooperative Relations

As mentioned earlier, if Serbia's strategy of "going west" is affected by the situation in the country and the social, religious and cultural public opinion that affects the process of Europeanization, Serbia has no choice but to turn to other countries for deeper cooperation. 2013, the introduction of China's One Belt, One Road Initiative provided Serbia with an opportunity for deeper cooperation with China on both sides of the border. In 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative gave Serbia the opportunity to deepen cooperation with China. Because for Serbia it is a rare opportunity to become an equal partner of China. The Belt and Road Initiative offers a rare opportunity in modern history to discuss development projects and investments without any conditions, which is much more attractive than the offer of the United States and the European Union to countries

willing to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, and there are no so-called implicit conditions (Branislav, 2015). China's cooperation with Serbia is equal and mutually beneficial, unlike the European Union accession process, which is characterized by cultural and religious problems and even manipulation of the process by the United States. China and Serbia have developed extensive cooperation under the UN framework, and military and security exchanges in the areas of regional counterterrorism and maintenance of peace and stability provide solid guarantees for extensive economic, humanistic and other cooperation (Ren, 2019). Although the attempted accession to the European Union prevented Serbia from acquiring the status of a European country, the "Going East" program has enabled Serbia to effectively improve its economic construction, humanistic exchanges and national identity with the help of China. Under the "Belt and Road" initiative, China has invested a lot of human, material and financial resources in the construction of roads, rail transportation and energy facilities in Serbia. Such Chinese investment and assistance to Serbia has greatly boosted its economy, which has been in the doldrums for more than 20 years since the Eastern European crisis, and has provided more jobs for Serbian citizens.

The reduction of unemployment in Serbia has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the volume of Serbia's merchandise import and export trade. Data from the Statistical Office of Serbia (SIS) showed that in January-April 2023, Serbia's total exports and imports amounted to 2.57 trillion dinars, an increase of 3.0% year-on-year in the previous year, or about \$23.633 billion or 21.945 billion euros. Of this, total exports amounted to 1.13 trillion dinars, up 12.8% year-on-year from the previous year, or about \$10.399 billion or 9.658 billion euros; total imports amounted to 1.44 trillion dinars, down 3.5% year-on-year, or about \$13.233 billion or 12.287 billion euros; and the deficit was 308.5 billion dinars, down 37.1% year-on-year, or about \$2.833 billion or 2.629 billion euros, the top five sources of imports were Germany (12.6%), China (11.1%), Russia (7.3%), Italy (6.9%) and Turkey (4.7%). In addition, according to the statistics of the Chinese Customs, the trade data for the three-year period from 2020-2023 show that the trade volume between Serbia and China has also shown a steady growth, which also reflects that the economic ties between China and Serbia are becoming closer and closer. The achievements of China and Serbia in recent years have been remarkable.

The data for the four years from 2020-2023 are shown in the figure.

vintages	Country (place) of origin of imports		Total exports and imports (/million RMB)	exportation		inlet		Cumulative ±% over same period last year		
	Country of final destination of exports (place)	Country of final destination of exports (place)								
2020			2,122,188	157,901	1,624,512	41,309	497,675	52.3	57.3	38.0
2021		Serbia	3,237,154	249,626	2,241,887	78,462	995,267	52.5	38.0	99.8
2022			3,239,156	184,515	184,515	88,280	88,280	22.2	13.8	44.1
2023			3,063,025	196,920	1,900,431	109,453	1,162,594	31.1	32.2	29.3

(Source: General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China).

In terms of humanistic exchanges, the Confucius Institute at the University of Novi Sad in Serbia held an event in the north-central Serbian city of Novi Sad on the 27th to celebrate the 9th anniversary of its establishment. Serbian Assistant Minister of Education Tubic said in his speech that the cooperation between Serbia and China in the field of education has never ceased and is constantly making progress, and the Confucius Institute at the University of Novi Sad has made outstanding contributions to this. Serbia and China have a high level of cooperation in various fields,” he said. In particular, I would like to emphasize Serbia’s active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, the two countries are committed to strengthening the comprehensive strategic partnership in order to further enhance the level of practical cooperation between them in various fields.” In addition, during the epidemic, the Chinese government had sent military transport planes to Serbia to transport anti-epidemic supplies as well as FK-3 air defense systems in response to the situation in Kosovo. All these examples show that China’s Belt and Road Initiative has given Serbia a rare opportunity for development. The growing interaction between China and Serbia has not only brought economic benefits to both countries, but has also resulted in the sentiment that, as the Serbian people put it, “we are not friends with China, but brothers”, which is a good example of how the correct concept of righteousness and profitability promotes the close friendship between countries and between peoples. In the new context of a new era, the Belt and Road Initiative promotes the building of a community of human destiny with new thinking (Li, 2018). “The Belt and Road Initiative has greatly enhanced China’s international status and image, and has led countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative to embark on the fast track of peaceful development. From the Serbian side’s point of view, participation in the Belt and Road Initiative has solved Serbia’s substantive needs, and the cooperation between Chinese and Serbian personnel has made the Serbian side feel China’s sincerity in cooperating with Serbia, instead of the “implicit conditions” that were required for joining the European Union before. The Chinese side has also made the Serbian side feel the sincerity of China’s willingness to cooperate with Serbia, rather than the “implicit conditions” needed to join the European Union as before. In this way, the Belt and Road Initiative has made the cooperation between the Chinese and Serbian sides more harmonious.

On the contrary, although the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in Serbia is positive and harmless, for the EU countries in the Western camp the successful implementation of the Belt and Road in Serbia is the first step of China’s “conquest” of Europe in order to expand China’s influence in Europe. However, for the EU countries in the Western camp, the successful implementation of the “Belt and Road” in Serbia is the first step of China’s “conquest” of Europe to expand its influence in Europe. Therefore, some European scholars have compared the Central and Eastern European countries, represented by Serbia, as a “Trojan horse”, i.e., helping China to expand its influence in Europe

and “splitting” the European Union. China’s behavior in Central and Eastern Europe contradicts the EU’s subjective assumptions. China wants to build stable relations with countries that have important decision-making power within the EU, not with “EU rebels” (Turcsányi, 2014). It can be seen from the above that the EU countries identify Serbia as an “EU rebel” and believe that Serbia’s cooperation with China as a European country is not conducive to the stability of the EU, and that the West has always been afraid and anxious that China’s rise will replace its future international status, so most of the EU countries are not interested in the “One Belt, One Road” program. Most EU countries are skeptical of China’s “Belt and Road” initiative. In terms of public opinion propaganda, Serbian non-governmental organizations in the Western countries’ values under the wrong indoctrination through informal behavior such as demonstrations and protests, wanton destruction of China’s aid projects in Serbia, resulting in the process of stagnation of the Serbian civil society to form a kind of China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative question, and ultimately the government had to comply with the people to slow down the Sino-Serbian cooperation, that Serbia, as a European country, should be included in the European Union, and the common prosperity with Europe. Serbia, as a European country, should join the European Union and prosper together with Europe. However, the facts show that China’s assistance to Serbia through the Belt and Road Initiative has not imposed its normative influence on Serbia, except for a substantial increase in Serbia’s comprehensive national power. The Serbian media and other forces of public opinion have witnessed that China’s cooperation with Serbia has been substantial and beneficial for the country. Thus, one of the main media in Serbia, Serbian dailies, has reported much more on Sino-Serbian relations than the EU, and the rest of the Serbian dailies’ reports have been on Sino-Serbian relations (Ju, 2019). The number of reports on China’s Belt and Road Initiative is also large, and the head of state frequently attends China’s Belt and Road Summits to strengthen cooperation and exchanges with China. Current Serbian President Vucic’s party is the Socialist Party of Serbia, which is also the current ruling party. The ruling party’s control of the media favors cooperation with the party and the national government. China has gradually replaced the European Union as the focus of cooperation between the national government and political parties, and media coverage is more oriented towards the Belt and Road cooperation between Serbia and China. The implementation of China’s Belt and Road policy has also brought development opportunities to Serbia, which has had a positive impact on the country and has satisfied the government. The ruling party, through its governmental operations, controls the media’s coverage of China-Serbia cooperation in a positive way. This makes the attitude of Serbian citizens towards China seem friendly and good, and the people prefer to cooperate with China instead of the West. Other CEE countries that have accepted Chinese cooperation, even Serbia, have no relevant evidence that China’s normative influence has been internalized by CEE countries (Zeng, 2023). From the point of view of public opinion, Serbian officials are gradually shifting their strategic orientation

from the West to the East, and are highly appreciative of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

In the context of the globalization process, the destiny of all countries has become more and more closely linked, and when Serbia is about to face the embarrassing situation of being reduced to an "abandoned son of the European Union", China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative has been put forward to solve the urgent needs of Serbia for the enhancement of its national strength and identity. The "One Belt, One Road" initiative is a solution to Serbia's urgent need to improve its national strength and identity. Through the "Belt and Road Initiative", in addition to the objective conditions to solve Serbia's infrastructure and economic growth shortcomings, which is obvious to the world; in addition, through the "Belt and Road" platform to enable Serbia to get rid of the political blockade of the West, and in the choice of national strategy has more autonomy, which is very important for Serbia to improve its identity in the whole of Europe. In addition, through the platform of "One Belt, One Road", Serbia has been freed from the political blockade of the West and has more autonomy in the choice of national strategy, which is a guarantee for Serbia to improve its identity in the whole of Europe (especially in the Balkan region). At the same time, the successful implementation of the "Belt and Road" in Serbia has strengthened the friendship between China and Serbia, and the implementation of China's "Belt and Road" strategy has increased China's voice in the international community, and has enabled it to build a better future with other countries under the Belt and Road Initiative.

4. Summary and Outlook

Geographically, Serbia, as a node in the East-West pivot, seeks to survive in the "gap" of "neither East nor West", but also to capture the "benefits" of the East-West game in the flexible space of "both East and West". East and West flexible space to seize the "fisherman's advantage" of the East-West game (Ren, 2019). The public opinion of Serbian nationalists on "Greater Serbianism" has made Serbia's attempt to "go west" since ancient times; however, due to the control of the Balkan Peninsula during the period of the Soviet Union, it has made the Balkan Peninsula and other Eastern European regions have the status of "Eastern countries". However, due to the control of the Soviet Union in the Balkan Peninsula, the Balkan Peninsula and other Eastern European regions had the nature of "Eastern countries", and the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union had caused incalculable losses to a large number of Balkan Peninsula countries, and therefore, they also favored the West, the United States and Europe in their strategic orientation to obtain economic assistance, but in the process of applying for membership of the European Union, the economy of Serbia has always been in the doldrums, and the assistance of China was just the solution to the China's assistance was the right solution to Serbia's economic problems. This is the direct reason why Serbia has

been economically “eastward” and policy-wise “westward” in the past. On the basis of the friendly relations between China and Serbia, the three-year epidemic has allowed Serbia to witness China’s reliability. The liberal international order dominated by the West is exclusionary and a tool of Western hegemony, while the East’s inclusive, pluralistic and open model of development provides a platform for the East’s economic recovery (Ren, 2019). Therefore, from the point of view of public opinion dissemination, the propaganda of “going west” is only motivated by the need for economic growth, while “going east” is not only motivated by the need for economic growth, but also has the all-weather strategic partnership between Serbia and China as a solid foundation and guarantee. The current relations between Serbia and China are influenced by political, economic, legal and social factors, which reveal asymmetries in many aspects, but do not prevent the development of good and friendly relations on the basis of the continuity of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the other two countries (Dimitrijević, 2018). To sum up, how the public opinion affects the Belt and Road Initiative cannot be judged solely on the basis of the influence of the external public opinion on the internal public opinion on the advantages and disadvantages of the Belt and Road Initiative for Serbia. The main public opinion factor that really influences whether Serbia goes east or west is that the Serbian people do not want to go back to a life of war and upheaval, and the government adopts the needs of the people and advocates for socio-economic development and the stabilization of the Balkan Peninsula, which is the most fundamental public opinion consideration. This is the most fundamental public opinion consideration. Although Serbia’s diplomacy of “East-West balance” has suffered a setback, in the long run, it is conducive to the maximization of Serbia’s geopolitical interests (Chen, Wu, & Li, 2016). Therefore, Serbia needs to grasp the opportunities brought by the Belt and Road Initiative, make full use of its geopolitical advantages, and properly control public opinion campaigns. Although it will not be easy to control public opinion campaigns, In order to control public opinion, Serbia can take the following measures: for example, Serbia can increase the details of the cooperation between Serbia and China in the Belt and Road Initiative and the feedback of the Belt and Road Initiative to the Serbian state in various fields and aspects. This will allow Serbia to see that the participation in the Belt and Road Initiative can strengthen its comprehensive national power and achieve the goal of improving its international status in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Participation in the Belt and Road Initiative will strengthen Serbia’s comprehensive national power and enhance its international status in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Furthermore, cooperation with China will achieve Serbia’s goals more directly than waiting for EU membership. It is evident that cooperation between countries is based on the principle that national interests are paramount. This is exemplified by Serbia’s harmonious relations with China, which are based on the interests of both sides. It is evident that there are still nationalist elements within the Serbian civil society

who adhere to the belief that Serbia is a European country. This view espouses the idea that Serbia should align itself with an orthodox European country and intensify its cooperative relations with other European Union countries. However, the principle of the supremacy of the interests of the country ultimately led Serbia to pursue cooperation with China. Additionally, public opinion in Serbia is inclined towards the East. In addition to the dissemination of information through policy and public opinion propaganda, the expansion of civil relations between Serbia and China also serves to publicize the potential benefits of such collaboration for Serbia. Still, the future of Serbia is still promising.

Founding

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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