

Balkan Security Challenges: Past Lessons and Future Outlook



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We have the title “Balkan Security Challenges: Past Lessons and Future Outlook.” If we want to talk about past lessons, that would be really an endless story. If we want to talk about security challenges: so many of them. And if you want to talk about future outlook, there are a variety of them. But I think that we can agree that all of the lessons that we learned from...let us start from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. You know every country in the Western Balkans has its own narrative. And we all have our most important historic dates, which is sometimes difficult to be confirmed in reality, and I dare say that there is no single historical moment that all of us cherish that could be a starting point for a common future outlook. But the processes that we have been through after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and all of the wars that we have been through unfortunately really draw some lessons that we have to take into account while thinking about our future.

The ambassador of Kosovo said that she had five passports, explaining, you know, the region. If I tell you that I lived in four countries and I represented three of them, that I thought really could never have happened 30 years ago, it simply explains by itself the complexity we lived and that we are now and even more in the future that we are facing.

Well, I think that there is something that we have now in common. And based, I would say, on the lessons learned, and that is a European, Euro-Atlantic future of the region. We think in Montenegro that is the only answer to most of the challenges that we have been facing today. And there are, as I told you, quite a lot of them.

Speaking about my own country, Montenegro has managed to become one of, in the meantime, one of the most economically developed countries now in the region. Let us say maybe one would not agree with this, but we consider that we are leaders in the processes that are taking place. As a matter of fact, out of 33 chapters that we are negotiating in the European Union, we have opened 30 of them, two of them closed. We hope that we will open all of them this year and start the process of closing of specific chapters.

How demanding that process is, let me just remind you when Croatia started negotiations in 2005, I was ambassador in New York and a colleague of mine from Croatia was just appointed as a Chief Negotiator and he went to Croatia and he told me that “those guys in Brussels invented some benchmarks for us.” And that was really the first time that the European Commission, the European Union asked Croatians to put some benchmarks in certain chapters. So they started. Several years after that, when we opened negotiations with the European Union, if I tell you that we have Montenegro in only two chapters, 22 and 23, that generally deal with the rule of law, that we have 83 interim chapters – not opening nor closing ones – interim chapters that we need to fulfill to go towards the process of closing the most important ones, I would say that simply shows how complicated and how demanding that process is.

I was the national coordinator for NATO for three years and we went through similar processes of reforms, adopting standards. I can really tell you that was not an easy task, that it was not at all an easy task. But where there is a will there is a way, and you must have really clear and strong leadership to go towards that.

So, in the meantime we succeeded last year in becoming a member of NATO. Let me just tell you that in the end of February 2018 we had an excellent meeting at the level of minister of defense – my minister Predrag Boskovic and Secretary of Defense Mattis – as the first one of that kind in the capacity as a new member of NATO.

Our next imperative goal is European Union integration, which is, as I said, really more demanding because there are so many things that we need to go through and some of them are really painful. It goes together with all of the countries in the region regardless of the level of negotiations where they are now.

So, the challenges facing every single country have been, I would say, totally described in the strategy for Western Balkans published months ago. We had recently, a visit of Mr. Juncker, he visited the whole region, and there was a meeting today in Bulgaria, in Sofia, and I will try to finish my statement with that.

Let me put it this way, I am not going to talk about my own thoughts and understanding of the strategy because I would be rather critical with regard to some aspects, but in general terms, we are encouraged by the recently published EU strategy. Though, we believe that the will from the side of the European Union to cherish individual results is something that we need to take care of. Every country, in our view, needs to be judged by its own merits. And we have shown that this is a system that works, throughout negotiations of Montenegro in regard to NATO. We are the only country now admitted to NATO – the only one before us was Spain, it happened you know when. Although we could have really different thoughts about the time framework, 2025. But when Juncker a couple of years ago said that no one would be admitted to the European Union by 2019, that provoked so many reactions in the region, you know, saying you do not really need to say it that way because we need to have perspective on political points of view, psychological, whatever. And now, the other way around, I said, “Okay, guys, you might think about 2025.” And then the critics would say, “Why do we really need to put that? We need to ask the people and the countries to go through all the reforms and when they are ready then we will think...” But I think it is good, no one confirms that but it is an idea that if we go through all the reforms that we are all going through, we might get there.

We strongly, therefore, believe that our membership in NATO has largely contributed to the stability in the region. We have chosen NATO as a security umbrella. Among other things you know, throughout recent history, we have unfortunately not been able in the region to formulate, to establish regional security arrangements. So, the only way for us was towards NATO and the European Union.

The challenges that are present there – I really do not want to be repetitive – but our position in regard to Macedonia is that we would like to see them as soon as possible in NATO and hope that the negotiations that are taking place regarding the name issue will be resolve. And resolving that will allow Macedonia to grow further. It is a complicated situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We would like to see more institutional changes that would allow Bosnia and Herzegovina to go towards the negotiating process both in NATO and the European Union. We see new perspectives for Serbia and Montenegro as well within the context of the European Union integration,

and I would share thoughts but with Stanislav about the possibility of NATO integration for all the countries in the region.

Therefore, my message for this panel is actually an invitation to both the European Union and NATO to keep an open eye. I do not want to go into the recent past, but you know once this country was not very much interested in some events when the dissolution of Yugoslavia started, but when they jumped into that in 1995, they were able to at least stop the war. And in some other cases, it is important to have the United States of America and European Union present there. The synergy of two of them is welcome as well.

We all know the famous sentence by a wise man. I would really like to see my region, at least for the time in my life, producing history that we can easily consume. And that is a task that we think should be made throughout the European Union and Euro-Atlantic integration processes.

Finally, let me just share with you a couple of things. I got some information from the capital that today there was a very important meeting organized by the Bulgarian Presidency in Sofia. President Borissov hosted a meeting with all of the leaders from the Western Balkans and Mr. Juncker, Commissioner Hahn, and Mogherini, and the first impressions were really positive ones regarding the future of the region.

I forgot to mention one particular aspect and that is good neighborly relations of the countries in the region. We do have a lot of problems, as you know, we have some issues with neighboring countries. Two of them are regarding demarcation and some border issues – I would call them issues rather than problems – and we hope that the first one is going to be resolved very soon with Kosovo, and we did our best and we really did try to help even some internal problems to be resolved in the best possible way.

So the ideas now are on reforms and we all need to go through additional reforms, as I said some of them are not really easy to go through; good neighborly relations; and to try to get closer to each other, building infrastructure. Stanislav mentioned the ideas and forums that we are all participating in and I hope that we will get soon some concrete results.

And the main message regarding this important strategy that was published recently, or messages are two-fold. First, it shows a kind of clear perspective for the Western Balkans and I close that clear and said renewed perspective of the Western Balkans towards the European Union that is really the perspective is there and we know that. And the second one is that the European Union has again an enlargement policy, I do not want to say high on their own agenda, but again, I would say higher than a couple of years ago. We all know what the problems are in the EU. Nobody knows how the European Union will look in five years from now or ten years from now, in 2025. We hope they are going to be there. Strengthen maybe institutional changes to a certain extent. It is important for the European Union to be there. And finally, to have the whole Western Balkans truly become a part of the whole of Europe. Otherwise, I am afraid we will keep on talking about “Balkan Security Challenges: Past Lessons and Future Outlook.”

Richard Prosen

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First, a bit of background perhaps on me. I cover transnational threats and related issues for the office that handles OSCE and NATO foreign policy issues at the U.S. Department of State. My principle focus is on terrorist-related threats and challenges, and I address these issues primarily from a training and capacity-building lens, as well as an information-sharing perspective. I also hold the international biometrics portfolio for the State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. My remarks today will highlight current threats and trends, and then supply an overview of recent counterterrorism efforts undertaken with partners from several Western Balkan countries.

I. Evolving Threat

As recent attacks in New York City, Barcelona, Mogadishu, London, and Kabul (to name but a few) remind us, terrorism is a significant and long-term threat impacting all corners of the globe. Because no region, country, nor community is immune to this common threat, we must work together to craft effective policies, national action plans, and programs with which to respond. We have come a long way since 2014, when foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) were streaming into Iraq and Syria, and ISIS was spreading like a pestilence across the region. The Global Coalition to Defeat-ISIS has made extraordinary progress in working with partners in the region and around the world. ISIS no longer controls any territory in Iraq, and nearly all of the populated territory ISIS once held across Iraq and Syria has been liberated.

Parallel to these military victories, the civilian sector has also made great strides. In 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2178, and last year, the UN adopted UNSCR 2396 on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (Returnees and Re-locators), which requires nations to robustly share information, including biometrics, on known or suspected terrorists, establish *inter alia* watch-list databases, and cooperate internationally to prevent FTF movement. These and other measures have made us all safer. Yet as we defeat ISIS on and off the battlefield, the group has adapted – we must adapt too.

How has the FTF threat changed over the last three to four years? We estimate up to 40,000 FTFs traveled to Iraq and Syria from at least 115 countries. That includes at least 6,000 FTFs from the West, and we assess at least 1,500 of those Western FTFs have returned home or have relocated to third countries, including within Southeastern Europe. Since operations in Iraq and Syria began in 2014, the ISIS fighting force has been reduced significantly. Our steady pace of battlefield victories has shattered the ISIS narrative of invincibility. Yet we are seeing signs of adaptability and resilience on the part of ISIS and its affiliates. We have seen battle hardened terrorists return home, to Europe and elsewhere, to carry out deadly attacks. Moreover, the global threat of Al Qaeda remains resilient to the point of eclipsing ISIS challenges in some regions.

* The opinions expressed herein are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Defense, or the United States government.

There is also the alarming trend of homegrown violent extremism. ISIS's prolific use of social media has expanded its reach, allowing the group to radicalize others to violence and to give advice on how to conduct attacks. Terrorist attacks are being carried out by individuals and small cells inspired by ISIS – but who aren't acting on the group's orders. These smaller-scale, individually-planned attacks often involve soft targets like hotels, tourist resorts, and cultural sites. We have seen this deadly trend in places like Berlin, Jakarta, London, Manchester, Nice – tragically, we saw it last year in New York City. We are working with governments and non-governmental partners around the world to counter ISIS's influence, terminate cycles of radicalization, and prevent recruitment. ISIS online media has seen significant declines since its height in 2015, with the most dramatic decreases occurring over the last five months. The loss of territory and voluntary efforts from the private sector – like those by Twitter, Facebook, Google, and Telegram – have degraded ISIS's media capabilities.

II. Addressing New Threats & Challenges

Let me highlight a few general measures that will be crucial as we confront increasingly decentralized threats, along with the return of FTFs and their families.

First, we need to work with partners to enhance border security. We have accomplished much on sharing biographic information, biometrics, as well as Passenger Name Record (PNR) and Advance Passenger Information (API) data. However, we need to do more to ensure that all states can and do collect this information, and use it effectively to track and thwart FTF and terrorist movements in full compliance with UNSCRs 2178 and 2396. After 9/11, the United States steadily improved its information-sharing measures. Over time, we successfully reduced barriers that inhibited our interagency colleagues from collaborating with each other. We are stepping up our efforts with our foreign partners to dismantle potential stovepipes that block effective and appropriate information sharing within and between governments. The United States now has information-sharing agreements with at least 60 international partners to identify and track the travel of suspected terrorists. Equally important, more than 60 countries, plus the United Nations, have contributed over 43,000 FTF profiles to INTERPOL's databases. Strengthening our shared resources empowers global law enforcement authorities to identify and disrupt FTF transit networks.

Second, we need to continue strengthening our criminal laws related to terrorism and increase the capacity of law enforcement authorities to investigate and prosecute violations of criminal laws related to terrorism. Nations have improved in prosecuting various FTF offenses. A good example comes from the region we are focused on today, the Western Balkans – a key transit route for FTFs heading to Syria and Iraq, or back home again. Since 2015, the U.S. government has increased cooperation with partners in the Western Balkans and Turkey to help improve capabilities to counter the FTF threat and interdict the flow of returning fighters to Europe. In the past few years, 131 people have been convicted under newly-passed FTF legislation in Southeastern Europe, and there are now about 33 more defendants indicted or on trial, all in Kosovo.

Third, we must address family members of FTFs who are returning home. Some of these returnees may have committed crimes in the conflict zone, in which case a law enforcement response may be appropriate. Some may themselves be victims of ISIS – particularly young children, who have witnessed and been forced to participate in

traumatic violent acts and been indoctrinated with extremist ideology. Efforts must be made to rehabilitate and reintegrate such victims back into society. The United States looks forward to addressing this specific issue via the Global Counterterrorism Forum's FTF Working Group, where we have launched a recent initiative with the Netherlands focusing on family members of returning FTFs.

Fourth, we need to make greater strides in amplifying the voices of our networks of local partners. We understand that those who come from and are closest to the conflict are the most credible voices to counter terrorist propaganda. The defeat of ISIS will not occur on the battlefield alone. The State Department has several initiatives underway to address the threat of messages promulgated by ISIS and other violent extremists. We have worked with partner governments to create a network of messaging centers that expose, refute, and combat online terrorist propaganda. These centers harness the creativity and expertise of local actors to generate positive content that challenges the nihilistic vision of ISIS and its supporters.

Finally, we need to confront homegrown violent extremism. We need to understand more fully what drives people to become homegrown violent extremists. How can we best intervene to dissuade or prevent young adults from becoming terrorists? The United States and the Kingdom of Morocco are leading a global effort under the auspices of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) to address homegrown terrorism. Launched in November 2017, the initiative aims to analyze the common traits among attackers to help develop proactive policies and programs, while reviewing potential underlying systemic gaps within and between national and local governments impeding their success in thwarting these types of threats and plots. The goal is to formulate good practices and concrete recommendations for useful intervention programs.

III. Scenario-Based Seminars and Tabletop Exercises

Turning now to recent counterterrorism efforts, I would like to provide a brief snapshot of scenario-based counterterrorism-related seminars (or tabletop exercises (TTXs) – that I have helped orchestrate over the last several years. I am sure most, if not all, are familiar with the concept and practical dimensions of tabletop exercises, or TTXs. But to summarize, TTXs are scenario-based brainstorming exercises aimed at spurring participants to develop strategies, plans, and policies to confront current and future challenges based on a simulated situation within an interactive environment. The case studies we have utilized include real world data placed into a fictionalized context. A group that I co-chair, the Partnership for Peace Consortium's Combating Terrorism Working Group (CTWG), has achieved success in conducting an innovative TTX methodology under Chatham House rules, or on a not-for-attribution basis. Our TTXs allow participants to challenge common assumptions, while engaging in open, honest dialogue on the challenges their communities face.

What are the merits of TTXs? Well, in short, TTXs help operationalize counterterrorism strategies, plans, and policies (i.e., testing theories and security frameworks through practical application), identify gaps and/or possible overlaps within security architectures, better flesh out training requirements, bolster multi-stakeholder linkages and societal resilience, and promote interagency and international collaboration.

Over the last several years, the CTWG has carried out a number of TTXs focused on addressing real world FTF challenges and terrorist threats, including homegrown violent extremism. Starting in 2015, we beta-tested the first TTX at the Marshall Center in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, and in 2016, executed three TTXs dealing with issues related to the migration crisis and building societal resilience. Two TTXs were conducted in-country working directly with host nations Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania, and the third hosted by the Marshall Center. In 2017, we conducted two more TTXs – both exploring reverse FTF flows – one in Macedonia and the other at the Marshall Center. For 2018, in addition to focusing on building and launching a NATO CT TTX capability, we plan to hold a regional TTX focused on FTF challenges within Central Asia and the region. This TTX will take place in July at the Marshall Center, where we will invite various participants from Central Asia and beyond.

In conclusion, the terrorist threat is constantly evolving, and we must remain vigilant against an ever-adaptive ISIS, its affiliates, and an al-Qa'ida on the rebound. We must also update our toolkit to ensure we have the necessary capabilities to confront an increasingly decentralized, self-directed enemy. We have found that promoting, developing, and implementing counterterrorism TTXs are useful in promoting societal resilience, international security, and sustainable collaboration. By harnessing the energies and talents of our societies and by cooperating across borders, we can and will overcome the threats we collectively face.

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