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Geopolitics of the Balkans after Trump

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Donald Trump's victory upended the predictable anti-Russian focus of Hillary Clinton's foreign policy, which would have featured a strong presence in the Balkans to preserve her husband's legacy and push the remaining states into the EU and NATO. If Trump's presumed isolationist stance and conciliatory tone with Moscow come to fruition, the U.S. will almost certainly cease to be a major player in the western Balkans, leaving a precarious power balance between Turkey, Russia, Germany and the United Kingdom.

In the short term, such an outcome is likely to strengthen Serb nationalists and pro-Russian politicians, while the Muslims of the region will now be completely reliant on Turkish support.

Putin has in recent years awoken Russian and Serbian dreams of a pan-Slavic link between the two states. In Serbian President Milorad Dodik, Putin sees an agent of chaos who he has accordingly emboldened with his support. Conversely, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksander Vučić had publicly fallen in line with EU and U.S. demands in opposing the recent Dodik-led referendum on a National Day of the Serbian Republic, designed to weaken Bosnia's already dysfunctional constitutional order and central government with the aim of holding a referendum on secession in 2018. Putin's objectives have centered on expanding and protecting Russia's

sphere of influence and international status, while also fermenting problems on Europe's periphery. While Putin might privately support Serbia's EU membership for the opportunity to have a Trojan horse with veto power to block anti-Russian moves, he will fight against any more Yugoslav republics joining NATO.

However, Russian interests and its presence in the Balkans have largely been ad hoc and superficial, limited to political support – such as the July 2015 U.N. Security Resolution veto over Srebrenica – without extensive investment, economic ties or military cooperation due to location. The possibility exists, however small, for Ankara to exploit its improved relations with Moscow to bring about an agreement over influence and stability, beginning with the withdrawal of support for Dodik. Naturally, concessions will be expected elsewhere.

The impact on British and German foreign policy will be significant. The U.K. has had strong ties with Belgrade and demonstrated a pro-Serbian bias since the Great Eastern Crisis of 1875-78, with both London and Berlin taking turns in exercising influence in Serbia, between the Berlin-leaning Obrenović dynasty and the London-leaning Karađorđević line. Support for the 2015 UNSC Resolution over Srebrenica should partially be viewed as a British attempt to reassert influence over Belgrade, at Berlin's expense.

British support for Milošević's attempt to preserve Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, with more centralized power in Belgrade, was grounded in the U.K.'s desire to maintain a strong, unified Yugoslavia. Such a state would act as a bulwark to a then newly unified Germany. Berlin's historic influence over Slovenia and Croatia would be diminished, while a strong Yugoslavia would act as an additional check across the continent.

Britain initially led from the back by blocking the German and Austrian push for Slovenian and Croatian independence recognition, making it clear that intervention would not occur and ultimately implementing a containment strategy. Helped by Washington's willingness to defer to Britain's judgement, the U.K. eventually took the initiative by leading peace negotiations, gaining French support, and pushing through a U.N. arms embargo, which guaranteed Serbia's continued military dominance.

The end of the Cold War, like Brexit, threatened Britain's place on the world stage, with its geopolitical status set to become commensurate with its economic performance. Britain now finds itself on the fringes of decision-making, with the "special relationship" between the U.S. and the U.K. already under threat. Its yearlong anti-Russian focus, in preparation for a Clinton presidency, has been upended, and Britain will now have to scramble to preserve its role as the trans-Atlantic link and most useful American ally.

Britain will seek to secure Washington's support for NATO, where London exercises disproportionate influence, and follow through on Theresa May's promise to play a leading role in EU affairs, especially foreign policy. They will pursue continued French support for anti-Russian initiatives across Europe and the Balkans, which also serve to distance Paris from Berlin, in turn, neutralizing German leadership. The U.K. will see its close ties to Belgrade as vital for re-establishing British influence in the Balkans to preserve its diminishing stature.