

“Serbia with Strong Allies or Neutral?”

Tuesday, June 30, 2009

Novi Sad

I would like to thank the organizers for inviting the U.S. Embassy to participate in this important conversation, and for framing the debate on Serbia's security and defense policy in a way that highlights the fundamental issue: should Serbia seek to reinforce its security relationship with its traditional allies, or should it chart a distinct and separate course from its neighbors by pursuing neutrality?

This decision is too often boiled down to the oversimplified question of whether Serbia should join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO. This is of course an essential policy choice facing Serbia, perhaps in fact the most significant open question facing this country given that broad consensus already exists regarding joining the European Union. The decision about NATO is not merely the choice of whether to join a particular organization, however, but rather a decision about the course of the country's security and defense policy in the coming decades. Discussions such as this one today are an important means of spurring public debate and highlighting the many factors that must be considered when making decisions about something this complex and vital.

Of course in the years since the democratic revolution the Serbian government has already taken many significant decisions regarding national security, which the U.S. government has welcomed. Serbia has established a working relationship with NATO, joining the Partnership for Peace program in 2006, welcoming a NATO military liaison office the same year, joining the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) in 2007, signing a security agreement with NATO in 2008, and agreeing on an Individual Partnership Plan (IPP) this year outlining future events and areas of cooperation.

Serbia has also worked with the United States to build a dynamic bilateral defense cooperation relationship that has endured, and even deepened, despite the tensions in the political relationship related to Kosovo's independence in 2008. Our military-to-military relationship is based on three pillars. First, professional development, which includes professional military education and intensified engagement. Second, I would highlight institutional development, which includes the creation of a non-commissioned officer corps, general staff interoperability, 2 and defense institution building. Finally, our cooperation aims to enhance combat capabilities, which includes peacekeeping operation readiness, development of niche capabilities, and enhancement of deployability. The dynamic State Partnership Program with the Ohio National Guard is a key part of our bilateral relationship, encompassing everything from exchanges to exercises. During his visit, Vice President Biden stated that we “will work to deepen the direct ties between our two countries. Our military to military relationship is already strong, with more than a 140 joint projects since 2004 -- and we believe it can grow even stronger.” This engagement with NATO and international partners such as the United States has been one factor in the success of the defense reforms that Serbia has achieved to date. The Serbian Armed Forces have been right-sized to about 30,000 troops. There have been pay increases for members of the military, training improvements, and legislation to codify defense reform, as well as improvements in strategic planning and procurement. The Ministry has also made progress on disposing of excess materiel such as ammunition and improving the security of storage facilities. Much work remains to be done in the area of defense reform, however, including continued rightsizing of the military, further institutional reforms, modernization of equipment, and enhanced capability in tasks such as peacekeeping. We are looking forward to Serbia opening a NATO mission in the near future. Given the difficult global economic situation, some may argue that continued reform and defense cooperation are too expensive and should be shelved in favor of neutrality. Such a decision would not be in Serbia's long-term national interest. In the post Cold War-era, neutrality no longer has the same meaning. In today's world, neutrality means going it alone - being full self-sufficient for all security challenges, including disaster response. A country of Serbia's size could not replicate the collective capabilities of the NATO alliance on the national level without breaking its budget. Maintaining the status quo through continued cooperation within the Partnership for Peace would of course permit Serbia to keep drawing on NATO's expertise as it moves forward with defense reform. The time has come to examine the question of whether this level of cooperation is sufficient for Serbia's overall

national interests, however, or whether those interests would be better served by joining NATO.

Deciding whether to join NATO is a momentous decision for any country that considers it. We know that for Serbia, simply posing this question brings up intense negative emotions that for many are as strong today as they were during the 1999 NATO intervention. These strong feelings about the intervention are of course understandable. We are not asking Serbians to forget 1999, but I would argue that it is in Serbia's national interest at this moment in its development to compartmentalize -- to not allow residual anger to cloud the question of whether Serbia would benefit more from remaining outside of NATO or joining it. What is NATO today? It is an alliance of 28 countries from North America and Europe committed to the goals of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty. Its fundamental purpose is to safeguard freedom and security through political and military means. It was founded on the simple premise that an attack on one is an attack on all. It operates by consensus, meaning that all member countries must agree before NATO takes any action. It is evolving to face the threats of the 21st century, from terrorism to pandemics to piracy. It is a major factor in the Balkans, with Croatia, Albania, Bulgaria, and Romania already members. It was founded by countries with which Serbia enjoys a long history of alliances, including the UK, the U.S., and France. It requires prospective members to demonstrate a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy; the fair treatment of minority populations; a commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts; the ability and willingness to make a military contribution NATO operations; and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutional structures. A country that joins NATO thus obtains enhanced national security thanks to NATO's collective security pledge, as well as the assistance of other members in addressing humanitarian or other disasters within its borders. It retains its sovereignty while gaining a seat at the table and a voice in consensus decisions on how the organization responds to global crises. It gains a mechanism to contribute to stability both in the region and around the world. It has the luxury of developing the niche defense capabilities in which it has comparative advantage, rather than having to spread itself too thin by trying to prepare to face all threats on its own. And of increasing importance in this time of economic crisis, an entrant can point to NATO membership as an indisputable sign of political stability, which is an important factor for foreign investors who value stability and security in addition to more traditional economic factors when choosing where to invest. 4

As Serbia works to assume a more active role in the international community, the United States hopes that the legacy of the past will not prevent a full and dispassionate national debate about the role that NATO can play in this process. This is a decision for the Serbian government and the Serbian people which merits an in-depth discussion. On behalf of the Embassy I would like to congratulate the organizers of this event once again for doing their part to stimulate discussion, and I look forward to a lively and open dialogue today.