

Chinese Drones in Serbian Skies

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Get ready for a new development: Chinese weapons systems in Europe.

Drones featured prominently in the recent confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus. But the race to acquire drones has already had a significant impact in the Balkans. In October 2020, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić attended *Cooperation 2020*, a Serbian military exercise, which involved the Chinese drone model CH-92A, delivered to Serbia in June 2020.

Beijing's export of drones is motivated by the desire to penetrate the European defence market and promote China as a rising power. Serbian purchase of the drones is based on national security considerations, foreign policy balancing between China and the West and domestic political considerations. While it is unlikely that inter-state conflicts will return to the Balkans, Belgrade risks finding itself in the middle of a growing rivalry between China and the US.

The CH-92A drones were purchased because they are more compatible with the indigenous Serbian drone development programme. This means China has transferred not only new weaponry but more fundamental knowledge and technology to Serbia. The CH-92A drones are manufactured by the state-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), with their combat radius exceeding 250 kilometres, increasing Serbian air-

policing capabilities. Each drone is equipped with two FT-8C missiles able to hit a target from nine kilometres away. These drones are also effective tools for surveillance and reconnaissance of enemy terrain.

China's shipment of drones to Serbia was its first export of military aviation equipment into Europe. The Chinese weapons-grade drones are already exported and used in conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. The idea of establishing defence industry cooperation with Europe has appealed to China for years. A significant obstacle to this ambition has been the arms embargo that the EU imposed on China back in 1989 in response to the Chinese suppression of the Tiananmen protests.

Serbia is an EU membership candidate, and one whose alignment with the EU's foreign policy has been lagging in recent years. Consequently, Serbia is the right place for testing the waters for any future attempt to enter into the European defence market. For China, outreach to the Balkans is a way to promote its vision of the international system. The same goes for the military domain where China is showing that it is a rising global power able to form military partnerships with distant countries like Serbia.

Serbia's reasons for the drones purchases are also complex. The first reason is the requirements of national security and deterrence capabilities. Most Serbian military hardware originates from the days of the Yugoslav army, and modernisation is vital for Belgrade. Relying on a security partnership with China one way for Serbia to implement this modernisation. As Vučić himself said in regards to the Chinese drones: 'This is becoming a modern way of warfare. In that respect, we lacked the capability and had no chance whatsoever to compete with more serious countries'.

In this effort to modernise its defence systems, the control over national airspace has played a significant role. The last two times Serbia was involved in a great power conflict were during the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia, preceded by the Nazi bombardment of Belgrade in April 1941, and NATO intervention during the Kosovo War of 1999. In both cases, Serbia was faced with far superior air power. Thus, the need to have minimal deterrence capabilities against any external air force shapes the thinking of both political and military leadership in the country, and the acquisitions of Chinese drones fit into this rubric.

Before the arrival of Chinese drones, the only unmanned aerial vehicle used by the Serbian military was the lightweight Israeli-made Orbiter, used by the Serbian army for reconnaissance since 2008. The technology transfers from China will help Serbia complete its drone project 'Pegaz' (Pegasus). Thanks to the delivery of Chinese drones, the Serbian air force will reconstitute the

353rd Intelligence Surveillance squadron, a squadron specialised in ISR which has been defunct since 2006. With these changes, Serbia is set to become the largest drone operator in the Balkans.

Beyond the military requirements, drone delivery is part of the well-established pattern of Serbian foreign policy where Serbia balances and plays Western and non-Western powers against each other to see from which side it can extract more concessions. While Serbia receives drones from China, it has also purchased Mistral, an infrared man-portable air-defence system from France. Between 2008 and 2018, the US was the largest military donor to Serbia, followed by China, Norway, Denmark and the UK, with Russia at a modest ninth place.

The strengthening of the Serbian military and outreach to powers like China should be viewed as an attempt to build bargaining power vis-a-vis the West. Indeed, in 2019 Serbia had the highest military expenditure in the Balkans having invested \$1.14 billion in its military – an increase of \$326 million (43%) compared to the previous year in which Serbia took the top spot from neighbouring Croatia.

Serbian domestic politics is also a driving factor behind Belgrade's decision. Belgrade likes the fact that transactions with China are non-transparent and do not involve the same stringent legal standards as the ones with the EU. Non-transparency remained the norm in Sino-Serbian relations, as Vučić declined to disclose the full price of the Chinese drones to the public. What favours China on the drone market is that, unlike US drones, their drones are cheaper and come with no political preconditions from Beijing.

Partnership with Beijing also allows Serbian politicians to promote themselves domestically as the ones who facilitate collaboration with a rising China and, by extension, enable the influx of Chinese capital. Investing in military strength helps in scoring points with the Serbian electorate. Indeed, according to a public opinion survey conducted in November 2020 by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, the Serbian military enjoys the highest confidence among Serbian citizens of all national security institutions (65%). In that same survey almost 75% of respondents believe that Serbia should reintroduce compulsory military service. Shortly after their delivery, Vučić publicly displayed Chinese drones to the media and the Serbian public.

While Serbian army modernisation and the presence of Chinese drones are changing the regional strategic landscape, the renewal of armed hostilities should not be expected. Serbia is surrounded by NATO countries. Moreover, the relations between Serbia and NATO are different than they were in the 1990s. Serbia has no interest in joining NATO, but it is a member of NATO's

Partnership for Peace programme, implementing the Individual Partnership Action Plan, the highest level of cooperation a non-member country can have with NATO. The economically lagging, demographically haemorrhaging Balkan countries, including Serbia, would have much to lose from the conflict. Any country that broke the peace in the region through military actions would undoubtedly provoke Western political ire and military intervention.

The greatest risk for Belgrade is being caught in the middle of a rivalry between Washington and Beijing. Under President Donald Trump, Serbia has become increasingly close to the US, and Vučić believed that under Trump Serbia would get a more beneficial settlement of the Kosovo dispute.

However, the US is concerned with Chinese involvement in Serbia. Trump's administration tried to counter the presence of Chinese tech giant Huawei in Serbia, and the US embassy in Belgrade has also expressed its concern over the Serbian purchase of Chinese weaponry. In March 2020, faced with Chinese competition in the global drone market, the Trump administration lifted some of the restrictions on the sales of lethal drones.

Even with Joe Biden as the new US president, the growing Sino-American rivalry is inevitably going to reach Serbia. The Serbian leadership tries to avoid making the ultimate choice between the two powers. On the one hand, when Biden's electoral victory was confirmed, Vučić said that Serbia is proud of being China's best friend in Europe. On the other, in December 2020 Belgrade postponed the introduction of a 5G network in the country. The decision was publicly justified on economic grounds and the notion that 4G infrastructure needs to be perfected first. However, it is more likely that the decision was made to avoid US pressure and the unpleasantness of refusing China and Huawei. When the US raises the issue of Chinese military hardware with Serbia, Belgrade will be once again forced to make a tough choice.

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The views expressed in this Commentary are the author's, and do not represent those of RUSI or any other institution.

BANNER IMAGE: A CH-4B drone made by the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation. Courtesy of Zerbout