

# **The Power of Path Dependence in US Foreign Policy: The Unfinished Business in the Balkans**

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## **Abstract**

This paper puts forward the idea that in the context of contemporary US foreign policy in the Balkans, the US-led humanitarian interventions in the 1990s have to be viewed as critical junctures that have produced distinct policy legacies and a type of policy lock-in which has made policy change hard to achieve. These have been compounded by the overall deprioritisation of the region on the foreign policy agenda. The paper lays out a theoretical framework based on historical institutionalism, particularly in relation to path dependence theory and its application in the context of foreign policy analysis. Following that, it will focus on the idea of “unfinished business” as the epitome of path dependence. The empirical analysis indicates there is a significant policy legacy and lock-in effect which has made it very hard for the US to make major changes in its policy stance towards the Balkans. The region occupies a peculiar space in US foreign policy as it is not the top priority issue, though at the same time not irrelevant, which further contributes to policy stasis. It continues to be seen through the prism of instability and as a client demanding constant patronage.

## Introduction

Literary and political classics are replete with various accounts of achieving “peace with honour” to end military engagement. From Cicero, Winston Churchill and Richard Nixon to Shakespeare, Edmund Burke and A. A. Milne, there is a consensus that often such exits present a compromise between saving face and forging peace. The foreign policy consensus in the United States is leaning towards ending the US-led ‘forever wars’, which has made the peace and honour tension even more relevant. While much of the contemporary attention is turned to the Greater Middle East, particularly given the latest news of US withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is a surprising scarcity of discussion regarding the long-term impact this will have on US foreign policy, as well as the states and regions it has intervened in. Namely, what is to be expected regarding the course of policymaking following the withdrawal, as well as what counts as success post-intervention? The Balkans offer a telling lesson of the way that even interventions that are widely deemed a success produce far-reaching consequences and require long-term US attention that has been hard to sustain.<sup>1</sup>

This points to a broader question in the study of contemporary US foreign policy. Specifically, moving forward, how should the United States deal with the commitments made in the unipolar era? The 1990s-2000s liberal interventionist and neoconservative prescriptions no longer have the monopoly over policy direction they once had, while the arguments for restraint and relying on other forms of power are increasingly getting more purchase (Friedman & Logan, 2016; Lind & Press, 2020; Posen, 2014; Thrall & Friedman, 2018; Wertheim, 2020). Therefore, examining how the United States responds to the developments in regions that might threaten important but non-vital US interests are going to be the real test of foreign policy in the nascent and increasingly competitive multipolar international system.

Much has been made about Joe Biden’s promise to get America back at the head of the table, as well as his early cabinet picks. The detractors have called it “the return of the blob” and a nostalgia for a bygone era (Bandow, 2020), while supporters deem it to be a much-desired course correction after the chaos of Trump years (Tepperman, 2021). In parts of the world where the new US president is a known entity given his involvement in shaping US foreign policy during his time as a senator and vice-president, his presidency is seen as a return to policy predictability and an opportunity to assert particular issues higher on the agenda of priorities.

In the Balkans, Biden’s election has elicited reactions that range from warm welcome to habitual hostility depending on where one stands on America’s interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s (Maksimović, 2021; Morina & Tcherneva, 2021; Ruge, 2020). Those who are cheering on America “being back” hope the incoming administration will help break the political impasse in their countries, while those who oppose it believe that Biden represents the continuation of the assertion of American might.

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of this paper, Balkans and Western Balkans will be used interchangeably. US government documents consider Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia as Balkan countries. The author recognises the contention over such regional grouping and labelling in a few regional states.

From the perspective of US policymaking, the 1990s Balkan interventions occupy a peculiar space in the foreign policy imaginary. These military and diplomatic victories have nowhere near the scope and significance of US involvement in the European theatre of the Second World War. Yet again, American interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo are an exception in the post-Cold War era as the military interventions that followed them ended up becoming military quagmires and insuperable diplomatic riddles as seen in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

This has left the United States in an awkward position of having to deal with what might best be described as “the consequences of success” – even if that success is extremely qualified and limited to the fact there has been no recurrence of large-scale violence in the Balkans. In particular, the legacy of 1990s interventions has produced expectations regarding America’s role in the region that regional states, European partners and ultimately US foreign policy officials and experts share. In brief, the belief that without the US involvement, regional security is brought into question and no major political change can happen, leading to the idea that it still has “unfinished business” to address. In that vein, in the post-1990s era the US approach to the region has been a reaction to the negative developments in the region, where the various administrations felt obliged to weigh in and get involved to address the unfinished business.

This paper puts forward the idea that in the context of contemporary US foreign policy in the Balkans, the US-led humanitarian interventions of 1990s have to be viewed as critical junctures that have produced distinct policy legacies and a type of policy lock-in which has made policy change hard to achieve. These have been compounded by the overall deprioritisation of the region on the foreign policy agenda. At the same time, given the policy legacy and under the set rules of the game, key actors have tended to operate according to the set roles – the US administrations reluctant to act, but unwilling to let go; the EU leadership seeing the region as a major source of regional instability if left unaddressed, yet often unwilling to credibly commit to enlargement; and the regional states’ elites vacillating between calling on US and EU to get involved in resolving the intractable disputes and support political and economic development, while at the same time often instrumentalising and politicising foreign patronage to score political points.

The paper will first provide a brief snapshot of the most recent episodes in the US Balkans policy to flesh out the path dependent dynamics. It will then lay out the theoretical affordances deriving from historical institutionalism, particularly in relation to path dependence theory and its application in the context of foreign policy analysis. Following that, it will focus on the idea of “unfinished business” as the epitome of path dependence for the past two decades. The empirical analysis indicates there is a significant policy legacy and lock-in which has made it very hard for the US to make major changes in its policy stance towards the Balkans. The region occupies a peculiar space in US foreign policy as it is not the top priority issue, though at the same time not irrelevant, which further contributes to policy stasis. It continues to be seen through the prism of instability and as a client demanding constant patronage. Often, such response has been politically motivated and expedient in the context of US domestic politics, other times, it has played into the broader dynamics of major power relations.

## Contemporary US Foreign Policy in the Balkans

The United States — for better or for worse — still occupies an indispensable role in the Balkans. This is a direct consequence of the US-led interventions in the 1990s which have cemented its status as a regional security guarantor and an arbiter. For a good part of Donald Trump's administration, there was an impression Balkans were 'spared' presidential attention as it has so often proved controversial in other regions of the world. Yet, the long shadow of humanitarian interventionism turned problematic when it became apparent that president Trump's desire to broker a peace deal between Serbia and Kosovo became motivated by political calculations of 2020 presidential elections, and the terms of the deal upended longstanding US policy (Grgić, 2020a).

The Trump administration's moves in Kosovo have been emblematic of the general trend of White House dominance in US foreign policymaking, even in states and regions that have fallen off the priorities list, like the Balkans. From the Vietnam War to the Iran-Contra affair, history abounds with examples of US presidents exploiting and instrumentalizing foreign policy issues in order to score political wins. Centralizing foreign policy in the White House can lead to politicization and suboptimal outcomes. Under the Trump administration, it was looking increasingly detrimental to regional security, as the Kosovo example demonstrates.

It was not that long ago that observers and policy experts on the Western Balkans were calling for greater attention to be paid to the region (Carpenter & Boduszynski, 2018; Grgić, 2018). Negative political, economic, and social trends, coupled with the more visible presence of rival major powers, suggested renewed instability. The worry was that the West, and particularly the United States, lost interest in the region, which gave greater latitude to Russia, China, and Turkey to exploit the void. Under Trump it seems the more pressing concern was what to do when US interest is back, but for all the wrong reasons.

Granted, there have been some promising developments as a result of US involvement in recent years. Greece and North Macedonia resolved their longstanding name dispute, which allowed the latter country to progress in its Euro-Atlantic integrations, and the US government was allegedly very helpful in brokering those talks. US diplomats were instrumental in brokering the rapprochement between Serbia and Kosovo (Eddy, 2020; Horowitz, 2019). Yet, since the latter half of 2018, when the idea of "correcting" and "adjusting" borders — which are creative euphemisms for partition — appeared on the negotiations agenda between the two countries, the US administration's attitudes and policies came under increased scrutiny.

At first, it was Washington's silence and ambiguity on the matter of adjusting borders that seemed to be the most worrying. Soon after, there were increasing and unequivocal signals that the United States would be open to a de facto partition. In late 2018, President Trump sent a letter to the Kosovar president urging him to strike a deal with his Serb counterpart. He then upped the ante in October 2019 by appointing Richard Grenell, one of the most controversial diplomats under his administration, to oversee the talks (Williamson & Vogel, 2020). Thereupon, things began to escalate to the point that led to the eventual collapse of Kosovo's government.

The crux of the problem stems from the mismatch between the declaratory and operational level. While the United States has consistently advocated for the region's integration in the EU and NATO, it has been unable to effect meaningful reform of the structures that it has helped create following the military interventions. The biggest obstacle to the Euro-Atlantic integration have been issues of domestic governance, particularly in cases of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. These are the direct legacy of the 1990s wars. So far, depending on the constellation of power and political alignment in the transatlantic space, the US administrations have floated reform proposals that ranged from advocating for constitutional reforms that would transcend the consociational model of governance to supporting partition and "peaceful ethnic cleansing" (Grgić, 2020a).

The lack of post-conflict planning and the dwindling political attention once the military engagement is over have long been identified as some of the key issues in the aftermath of recent US military interventions. Comparatively, many claim Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have actually not been as bad on these metrics given the larger per capita spending on development assistance and attention they have received by the sheer virtue of being on the European continent (Dobbins, Lesser, & Chalk, 2003). At the same time, over two decades since the interventions, the two are still firmly in the basket of 'unfinished business' – Bosnia-Herzegovina a problematic experiment in consociationalism and Kosovo still lacking recognition from about half of world's states.

Recently, we have marked yet another 'big' anniversary of the 1995 Dayton Accords. As it has become customary, this has been accompanied by a standard string of panel discussions, opinion pieces and special editions of books and journals that ultimately converge on the assessment that Dayton was the best out of the worst available options to end the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). However, it is clear it has far outlived its purpose as it has created a convoluted system of governance that has solidified ethnic divisions in the country.

Kosovo received more attention this year given president Trump's scramble to improve his re-election chances and etch a foreign policy win by brokering a peace deal between Serbia and Kosovo. After the dust settled from the pomp and circumstance of a White House meeting with the Balkan leaders, it became clear little has changed on the ground apart from some promises of greater economic cooperation and foreign policy concessions that served the outgoing Trump administration's Middle East agenda more than anything else.

Given the nature of peace settlements, and the more prosaic fact the region is surrounded with EU states, the post-conflict assistance with state-building and development was never expected to be exclusively America's "job". Yet all throughout the past two decades, the United States still depicts the region as "unfinished business". This is telling of a dynamic that can be best described as path dependence in the post-intervention era, which is explained in the following section.

## Why Changing Course is Hard to Do: Path Dependence in Foreign Policy

This paper builds on theoretical affordances of historical institutionalism, particularly in relation to path dependence theory and its application in the context of foreign policy analysis. The central claim of historical institutionalism is that choices formed when an institution is being formed, or when a policy is being formulated, have a constraining effect into the future (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Koelble, 1995; Peters, 2019). This dynamic is a result of the tendency towards inertia that institutions and policies display. Once a particular path has been forged, it requires a significant effort to divert them on to another course. In other words, ‘history matters’ because formations put in place in the early stages of an institutional or policy life effectively come to constrain activity after that point (Peters, 2019; Skocpol, 1995).

Path dependence has become, within a relatively short space of time, a widely used concept in social science (Alexander, 2001; Arrow, 2000; Berman, 1998; Bruggeman, 2002; Garud & Karnoe, 2001; Greener, 2002a, 2002b; Hansen, 2002; Hedlund, 2000; Holzinger & Knill, 2002; Mahoney, 2001; O'Brien, 1996; Pierson, 2000; Scott, 2001; Sterman & Wittenberg, 1999; Torfing, 1999, 2001; Wilsford, 1994). It posits, in general terms, that antecedent conditions such as structural properties, beliefs and values inform and constrain future decisions even in changed conditions, mostly through positive feedback and increasing returns.

In the field of foreign policy analysis, path dependence is less clearly defined, and few studies specifically employ path-dependent arguments (Leithner & Libby, 2017). However, inasmuch as policymakers act within institutional contexts, it stands to reason that they, too, are influenced by previous decisions. March and Olsen (1989) refer to “institutional repertoires” that make change difficult when organizational leaders prefer to draw on pre-existing solutions rather than consider new ones. Similarly, North (1990) points out that institutional structures determine outcomes and that change often remains incremental because of the formal and informal constraints institutions place on choice.

If we accept the basic premise of policy inertia and aversion to change, the crucial question that emerges is how does one break free from them? In short, how does change occur (Gorges, 2001; Hira & Hira, 2000). In historical institutionalism, political processes come to resemble ‘punctuated equilibria’ (Krasner, 1984), where substantial change is only possible in ‘critical junctures’ (Collier & Collier, 2002) or ‘policy windows’ (Kingdon & Stano, 1984) before institutions and policies once again settle down on to a new path, and inertia becomes the norm. Hall and Taylor (1996) argue that well-developed responses to the question of why critical junctures arise have not yet been formulated. In essence, change is exogenous to the model.

In order to establish path-dependent dynamics, we need to be able to demonstrate several viable alternatives existed for the development of the policy in question (Goldstone, 1998; Mahoney, 2001; Pierson, 2000). Following this, contingent events must be shown to have played a substantial role in establishing the particular policy or institutional form that emerged. Leading on from this, we must specify the conditions in which we would expect path-dependent systems to reproduce their form and ‘lock-in’ to occur. After the period of production, a period of reproduction appears during which the policy or institution must generate feedback mechanisms that create inertia, or

possibly even increasing returns to ‘lock out’ competing political ideas. Once the logic of path-dependent policy or institution has been established, it will tend to generate an inertial force where established vested and cultural interests have a high opportunity cost for challenging the system (based on a ‘necessary’ relationship both within and between the groups). This will tend to lead to “morphostasis”, which is most likely to appear where ‘necessary’ emergent properties are reproduced in the policy or institution (Greener, 2005).

In the context of US foreign policy in the Balkans, this translates to the following. The origins of path-dependent processes began with multiple equilibria situations between 1995--1999. There is no doubt viable policy alternatives existed in terms of the level of US involvement in both military interventions and peace settlements – from different types of military interventions to other types of conflict termination blueprints. The accounts of the decision-making in the lead up to US interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, as well as those of peace deal negotiation in Dayton and Kumanovo suggest that these were a product of interbranch and bureaucratic politics in the US (Grgić, 2019; Grgić, 2020b). However, as per the path dependence model, it is clear that contingent events played a substantial role in establishing the policies and institutional forms that emerged. Namely, the US-led interventions and US-driven negotiations were the product of two contingent factors. First, the US status in the international system at the time as the undisputed leader in the unipolar world facilitated such action as it faced less hurdles in executing such action. Second, in the absence of great power rivalry that defined the preceding decades, humanitarian crises that resulted from commitment of mass atrocities increasingly became seen as threats to international peace and stability, thereby prompting response from the international community. This would later be articulated and operationalised as the responsibility to protect norm. Finally, during the presidencies of all US presidents following the 1990s interventions in the Balkans it has been clear that conditions under which path-dependent policies have been reproduced and created a type of lock-in, mostly due to executive imperatives and bureaucratic politics.

In the Balkans, US policy has been the product of a curious tension between the push to retreat from the region due to more pressing foreign policy priorities — and the hope that the EU would solve problems on its own — while at the same time asserting its pivotal role and being pulled to weigh in whenever political deadlocks and tensions arose. The hefty US involvement in the region in the 1990s created a path dependence and a set of expectations as to the US role in the region that can be observed on three fronts. First, usually for reasons of European disunity on important matters, the United States has been called to step in whenever a crisis emerged. A myriad of examples can be used here, though those relating to declaration of Kosovo’s independence in 2008 and helping broker normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo in 2013 offer the most vivid depiction of such dynamics. Equally, NATO enlargement in the region is yet another example of path dependent dynamics that has been US-led and in response to lack of prospects for most of the Western Balkans to join the European Union. This was most visible as recently as 2019 when the EU announced it would be blocking Albania and North Macedonia from moving forward with their membership talks, which made the United States push stronger for the acceleration of Euro-Atlantic integration of the region, even under a NATO-sceptic president such as Donald Trump. Second, path dependence has also conditioned regional countries to expect US involvement. The Western Balkans is home to states that have recorded some of the highest and lowest anti-American sentiment globally, which is no surprise given the not-too-distant past. However, even

though the United States is equally revered and reviled, it has always been seen as the broker of last resort in a similar way to the role it played in the 1990s. Lastly, as the following section will demonstrate, the path dependence of US policy in the Balkans over the past two decades can be seen in the “unfinished business” discourse. This suggests that the critical junctures such as military interventions and peace deals created the policy legacy and policy lock-in under which it still views itself as a critical security guarantor in the region.

### **The Epitome of Path Dependence: The Unfinished Business**

In the truncated version of empirical analysis, this section of the paper seeks to demonstrate how the “unfinished business” discourse has been a continuing feature of US policymaking in the Balkans since the early 2000s. In the context of US Balkans policy, this phrase can be traced back to president Bill Clinton’s June 2, 2000 speech in Aachen, Germany on the occasion of receiving the International Charlemagne Prize.

Of course, for all of the positive developments and our good feelings today, the job of building a united Europe is certainly not finished, and it is important not to take all this self-congratulation too far. Instead, we should focus today on two big pieces of *unfinished business* and one enduring challenge. The first piece of *unfinished business* is to make Southeast Europe fully, finally and forever a part of the rest of Europe. That is the only way to make peace last in that bitterly divided region.

It cannot be done by forcing people to live together; there is no bringing back the old Yugoslavia. It cannot be done by giving every community its own country, army, and flag; shifting so many borders in the Balkans will only shake the peace further.

Our goal must be to de-Balkanize the Balkans. We must help them to create a magnet that will bring people together, a magnet more powerful than the polarizing pull of their old hatreds. That's what the Stability Pact that Germany helped to establish is designed to do, challenging the nations of Southeast Europe to reform their economies and strengthen their democracies, and pledging more than \$6 billion from the rest of us to support their efforts. Now we must turn quickly those pledges into positive changes in the lives of ordinary people, and steadily bring those nations into Western institutions.

Since, it has been used by US policymakers, analysts and commentators alike in a way that depicts the quintessential dynamics of path dependence. Namely, that the United States has a key role to play in stabilising the Balkans and maintaining security. The scope of analysis in this section included congressional hearings on issues related to the Balkans between 2000–2020. The reason congressional hearings were chosen as the prime source of evidence of policy legacy and lock-in is because they include testimonies and statements from all the relevant actors in policymaking – legislative and executive branch, as well as experts from outside the government such as academics and policy analysts. Due to their public availability, hearings transcripts have long been considered “a goldmine of information for all the public problem” (Galloway, 1959), and some of “the most important publications originating within Congress” (United States National Archives Records Service et al., 1972). The following is a selection of hearings with transcript snippets which have discussed and/or referred to the Balkans as “unfinished business”.



### **S. Hrg. 108-700: U.S. Policy Toward Southeast Europe: Unfinished Business in the Balkans (July 14, 2004)**

As we address the question of "Unfinished Business in the Balkans," I would like to define the business we are trying to finish; it is nothing less than the completion of the President's vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.

As Under Secretary Grossman noted in his address to the North Atlantic Council in November of last year, "our focus must be on integrating the region into the community of Euro-Atlantic values: democracy, rule of law, and individual freedom."

As he stated, "bringing the Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions is our goal," and we are dedicating all the means available to us toward this end. As he concluded, "we are not departing the Balkans; we are bringing the Balkans back into Europe."

There are obstacles in our path:

A decade of conflict has left ethnic division and economic devastation.

War criminals remain at large; and nearly one million refugees and internally displaced persons remain displaced.

Porous borders and weak rule of law structures present serious human rights and security concerns, particularly in the post-9/11 world.

The transition from a focus on aid to a concentration on trade has gone slowly.

### **S.Hrg. 110-629 — Kosovo: The Balkans' Moment of Truth? (March 4, 2008)**

I was here for the first time 4 years ago, in 2004. And reviewing what I had submitted then, things have greatly changed and, in other ways, have not changed. The theme then was the unfinished business in the Balkans. I think we are seeing the tail end of that unfinished business, as others have said.

We are paradoxically both far beyond where we were 4 years ago, and confronted by many of the outstanding challenges. Why is this the case? Principally because this part of Europe underwent a unique dynamic after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 different to other post-Communist countries. Something happened in Europe that should not have happened: The violent breakdown of a European country--former Yugoslavia. This conflict lasted through the last decade of the 20th century and ended with the birth of six new countries, and now the unilateral self-proclamation of a seventh one has created a set of difficult challenges for the transatlantic community.

It is essential that this remaining part of a more narrowly defined European Continent become as soon as possible, following the prescribed rules and conditions, each country on its own merits, a member of the European Union and of the Euroatlantic community. This will ensure the pillars of a lasting stability and peace.

### **S.Hrg. 111-660 — Unfinished Business in Southeast Europe: Opportunities and Challenges In The Western Balkans (April 14, 2010)**

We view Macedonia's NATO invitation as unfinished business--their membership is important for regional security and stability. We are aware that the dispute over Macedonia's name is a difficult issue, and we continue to encourage renewed efforts under the auspices of the United Nations mediator to resolve this issue.

I think that as we deal with the current challenges, this kind of combined effort is really essential, and I think we are seeing leadership on the part of the Europeans as we grapple with these bits of unfinished business in Bosnia and in Kosovo. I think that's a healthy model for solving other international problems, as well.

The visit of Vice President Biden for this administration was, I think, a crucial reminder that there was unfinished business and that it required the joint efforts of the United States and of the European Union to continue to reach a goal that is within reach, and I think that compared to all

the other burning issues on the international agenda that we all confront and they need no mention, I think this is one where we can have a success all together, first of all, for the benefit of the citizens of the region where I come from and for the transatlantic community.

The Balkan Peninsula, after the Apennine and Iberian Peninsulas, is the final Southern European component that will join the EU--thus continuing the unfinished business of creating a Europe whole and free and at peace.

Unfinished business in 2004 versus unfinished business in 2010 I was first honored to be invited to testify in the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 14 July 2004. The title of the hearing 6 years ago was "U.S. Policy toward Southeast Europe: Unfinished Business in the Balkans."

Understandably, the unfinished business of 2004 is different in large part than that in 2010 and yet in other respects similar. The domestic challenges of strengthening democratic institutions, a democratic political culture, the rule of law, more effective governance and transparency, and the fight against organized crime and corruption have made headway but much remains to be done throughout the region. Each of the region's governments are now fully part of the EU integration process, which means pursuing deep-seated reforms in key sectors of society and preparing their economies to join a single market where competition will be fierce and unyielding. But as they all prepare entrance and then enter as full-members, they will benefit from the support of the so-called structural funds that help align the economies of the new countries with the rest of the EU nations. The EU itself will change in time and will grow to a Union of around 36 states.

We're all impatient to see success in the unfinished business and that is why we have to stay the course.

### **House Hearing, 112th Congress — The State of Affairs in the Balkans (November 15, 2011)**

While the United States and European Union have important roles in completing unfinished business in the Western Balkans, the main responsibility falls on the citizens and leaders of the regions. Local political leaders must be willing to move past divisions and personal interests to focus on delivering genuine reforms and making necessary compromises as demanded by their citizens. We need partners who share this vision, who are prepared to put the interests of the people ahead of their own pride, who are willing to compromise for the greater good. The international community cannot want progress and reform more than local leaders do.

Some talked about the unfinished business of Versailles. The two countries that were made there, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, disappeared. Unfortunately, we did not have the fortune of dismembering peacefully, as the Slovaks did, but it was in blood and war and hell. And I think saying that, that no one wishes to go back there, neither the people nor their elected officials. I think it is loose talk when people say that Bosnia is prone maybe to go into new conflicts. It would be like saying after the U.S. Civil War, 11 years after that war, that America would go back into a new civil war.

### **S.Hrg. 114-712 — NATO Expansion: Examining the Accession of Montenegro (September 14, 2016)**

In many ways, the Western Balkans remains a piece of unfinished business and, as recent headlines from the region demonstrate, reconciliation is incomplete. However, despite the recent resurgence of demagogic populism and nationalism across Europe, it is telling that every single country in the Western Balkans has chosen to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration as the best guarantee of its long-term peace, security, and prosperity.

I would like to see the United States play a leadership role responding to these challenges, supporting our EU partners of course, but not at the expense of doing what's right for these countries which also aspire to eventual NATO membership. There is unfinished work in the Balkans and U.S. leadership is key to resolving these long standing issues.

### **S.Hrg. 115-200 — United States Policy and Strategy in Europe (March 21, 2017)**

I think it also is a contribution to stability in the western Balkans, which is still unfinished business. We still see internal divisions in Bosnia. We still see problems now in Macedonia. So I think setting an example that countries that do do their homework, meet the criteria, contribute to stability in their neighborhood can become members of NATO, even if they do not bring a huge amount of defense capability to the Alliance.

### **S.Hrg. 115-715 — Southeast Europe: Strengthening Democracy and Countering Malign Foreign Influence (June 14, 2017)**

Finally, the Western Balkans remain the unfinished business of a Europe whole and free. This concept has been at the heart of U.S. strategy toward Europe, precisely because a whole, free Europe removes the continent as a conceivable future battleground and maximizes the likelihood that the United States will have the kind of capable, coherent partner we need to address global challenges. Instability in Europe's Southeast could deprive the United States of a strategic partner on facing challenges further afield.

### **House Hearing, 115th Congress — The Dayton Legacy and the Future of Bosnia and the Western Balkans (April 18, 2018)**

I think it is important for us to talk to our European allies and have their strong action together with ours in fixing the Western Balkans as an unfinished business as soon as possible because enhancing the rule of law, enhancing the European standards of democracy to the Western Balkans, it's not to give geographical background, but that your Balkans are the part of Europe. You can fly 45 minutes from Sarajevo to Vienna.

### **S.Hrg. 116-108 — Successes and Unfinished Business in the Western Balkans (October 23, 2019)**

Unfinished West Balkan business -- Despite significant progress in the past 25 years, much of the West Balkan region cannot be considered comprehensively secured until several obstacles are removed. The lack of resolution compounds the region's problems, visible in economic stagnation, official corruption, social instability, ethnic tensions, and population outflows. International attention needs to focus on the following disputes and problem areas: 1. Dysfunctional Bosnia-Herzegovina; 2. Kosova-Serbia Dispute; 3. EU Blockage; 4. Russia's and China's Subversion

There are several themes that emerge from the way unfinished business in the Balkans has been discussed in the congressional hearings over the past two decades. First, it is clear that the unfinished business in Balkans is a subset of unfinished business in Europe that was set on the agenda by president George H. W. Bush in 1989 when he exclaimed US vision for Europe was to make it “whole, free, and at peace” (Bush, 2009). In this sense, the deep institutionalized perception of European weakness was both the driver and the outcome of US policy. In the 1990s the US saw the European continent as inherently unstable. US officials therefore sought to consolidate the Cold War gains in Europe of free markets and democracy by expanding NATO eastwards and ensuring a leading role for the US within future European security arrangements.

At the outset of George W. Bush's administration we saw an overt push to hasten the resolution of unfinished business and break away from the policy legacy of the Clinton years. This was perhaps best encapsulated in then campaign adviser Condoleezza Rice's 2000 interview in which she proclaimed "Carrying out civil administration and police functions is simply going to degrade the American capability to do the things America has to do. We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten" (Gordon, 2000). However, this was only the case very early in Bush presidency. During the second term in office, Bush administration became equally invested in finishing the unfinished business of Dayton reform around its tenth anniversary (which ultimately went nowhere) and the push for Kosovo's independence in 2008. The latter is the function of what could best be described as imperative policy making that was driven by the White House since the administration became more comfortable with democracy promotion as a foreign policy agenda. While more primary research should be conducted to make stronger inferences regarding the changing foreign policy priorities being the result of 2003 Iraq War, it is without a doubt that the nation-building activism in the second term is in stark contrast to Bush's early years. Moreover, the administration's strategic activism on the US-Adriatic charter reflected the White House's stance on NATO enlargement and the need to expand the coalition of the willing.

During the past decade, it is clear the Balkans have been seen as the perennial unfinished business – some of the testimonies allude to this very fact. What varies during this time are the sources of instability and threats to peace that are perceived as the prompts for US involvement and response, as well as the stance towards working with the European allies. Different countries in the region are identified as warranting urgent attention depending on the emergence of political, economic and/or security crises, even though BiH and Kosovo remain top of the agenda. During the Obama presidency, the most striking qualitative change was the significant push for coordination with the EU in dealing with the region, which petered out during the Trump years. As discussed earlier, the Trump administration notoriously sought to capitalise on the unfinished business in the Balkans by pushing for a peace deal between Serbia and Kosovo, while at the same time side-lining the European partners. Intriguingly, the most recent rhetoric around the EU sees it as a source of problems in the region given the accession negotiations delays and blockage.

Finally, the challenges that have emerged in the context of diffusion of power away from the Euro-Atlantic space and the increasing challenges to the post-Cold War international order have been reflected in the US policy stance towards the Balkans. Since at least the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, there has been a growing sense that the Balkans are yet another battleground in the Euro-Atlantic struggles against Russia since like other parts of Europe, the region has not been immune to Russia's influence and spoiler techniques. Moreover, given the growing inflow of Chinese investment and development of deeper ties with regional states, the urgency of responding to the growing great power politics has reignited the unfinished business rhetoric.

## Conclusion

In mapping out the US policy in the Balkans in the post-intervention era, this paper aimed to advance some conceptual-analytical tools for the study and better understanding of the

contemporary US-Balkans relations. The first and major intervention has been to introduce the idea of path dependence as the best theoretical account to understand US foreign policy in the Balkans. Namely, the US-led humanitarian interventions of 1990s should be seen as critical junctures that have produced distinct types of policy legacies and a policy lock-in. At the same time, the overall deprioritisation of the region on the foreign policy agenda has further contributed to the inability to break from set path. Where attempts of changes have occurred, they have been in service of political imperatives of given political administrations.

The second conceptual contribution has been in tracing the use of the “unfinished business” discourse and understanding it as a reflection of path dependence. The Balkans are not unique in being seen as the unfinished business in US foreign policy since a cursory analysis of elite discourse in the US shows the term has been used to depict US policy in other realms such as Northern Ireland, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia to name just few. This is telling of a broader issue in US foreign policy after the so-called unipolar moment. Namely, how the US responds to the commitments made and paths carved out during the time when it operated under significantly less constraining international environment.

The empirical analysis presented here is only a sketch of the broader analysis which also includes interviews with key US government officials who have served in Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations. Overall, the results so far indicate there is significant policy legacy and lock-in which has made it very hard for the US to make major changes in its policy stance towards the Balkans. The region occupies a peculiar space in US foreign policy as it is not the top priority issue, though at the same time not irrelevant, which further contributes to policy stasis. It continues to be seen through the prism of instability and as a client demanding constant patronage. At times, such response has been politically convenient in the context of US domestic politics, while at other times, it has played into the broader dynamics of major power relations.

As the literature on path dependent systems suggests, a mechanism for change is in the interaction of cultural and structural spheres, as well as significant involvement of human agency. In the Balkans, for any serious reform to stand a chance it needs to primarily have local buy-in and be driven from bottom-up. On the international front, it is abundantly clear that US cannot succeed in effecting change unless it shares the leadership role with the EU. President Biden has a unique opportunity to press for a concerted action with the EU. Given his cabinet picks include a number of people who have direct knowledge of the region from their time in the Clinton and Obama administrations, there is no a shortage of expertise to formulate concrete proposals and act on them. Yet, there is a peril that precisely the issue of staffing might perpetuate the policy status quo. Equally, the danger lies in the possibility the US and EU will become distracted with more pressing issues on the transatlantic agenda and will deem all of this to be too hard. This is precisely what happened during the second term of the Obama administration.

More than anything, it is crucial that the EU overcomes the petty internal divisions that have mired the negotiation process with the prospective candidate states, thereby offering a credible path for accession and mandating domestic reforms. The latter is particularly critical over issues of corruption and the rule of law. Regrettably, as we’ve seen time and again, EU’s enthusiasm about

adding new member states has been meagre on the best of days, and it has been far from the best of days for the EU.

Furthermore, Russia and China have been building up their presence and influence in the region. Given this systemic dimension and problems related to the major power competition, it is critical the Biden administration does not take the bait of engaging in a bidding duel with its strategic competitors to win the regional states' fondness. Prioritising stability and accommodating the existing powerholders for the fear of pushing them into the competitors' fold is ultimately damaging to the democratic rule and America's reputation.

There are some encouraging signs the incoming Biden administration fully understands the challenges ahead of it. However, given the deluge of domestic and foreign policy challenges, and with the Balkans far from the list of top priorities, there is a prospect that yet again expectations will far surpass policy implementation. While the forever wars might be a thing of the past, the consequences of military interventions even in the best-case scenarios extend long into the future.

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