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Serbia's Strategic Ambiguity as a Governing Strategy: EU Accession, Russia, and China

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Abstract
Strategic ambiguity is often seen as a short-term adjustment by smaller states facing great-power rivalry. In Serbia, however, it has evolved into a stable governing strategy within the framework of European Union accession. Drawing on hedging, omnibalancing, and ontological security, this article explains how foreign policy choices are shaped by concerns about regime stability, asymmetric economic dependence, and competing identity narratives. Based on a qualitative case study combining content analysis, discourse analysis, and process tracing of key decisions, the study shows that Serbia uses strategic ambiguity to manage domestic political pressures, pace international commitments, and navigate its complex relationships with the European Union, Russia, and China, selectively complying with EU accession requirements when politically or strategically advantageous.

Keywords
Strategic Ambiguity; Serbia; EU Accession; Russia; China; Hedging; International Affairs

INTRODUCTION

Belgrade has increasingly adopted a posture of strategic ambiguity, a foreign policy of "not choosing sides," as President Aleksandar Vučić himself stated when pressed about aligning with Western sanctions on Russia. This approach has seen Serbia endorse EU integration in principle while pragmatically hedging its bets: refusing to join Western sanctions on Russia, embracing Chinese investment, and declaring military neutrality even as it conducts joint drills with NATO and receives arms from Russia. Why has Serbia adopted this triangulated diplomacy, and what are its implications?

Since the fall of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia has consistently found itself pulled in multiple directions: toward a declared European future, yet constrained by history, energy dependence, and political symbolism. These pressures take concrete form. From Brussels comes the expectation of gradual alignment with EU law and foreign policy positions. Moscow, for its part, anticipates continued loyalty, particularly regarding Kosovo and sanctions. China approaches the relationship differently, emphasizing infrastructure, loans, and investment, largely without the political conditions associated with the European path. By presenting Serbia as a neutral actor positioned between East and West, the government reinforces its domestic legitimacy and political control.

Serbia's strategic ambiguity is not merely a series of ad hoc maneuvers but a consolidated policy approach, evident in official statements, policies, and international engagements. Military neutrality is enshrined in Serbia's security and defense documents,

operating more as a backdrop to policy than as a dramatic proclamation. EU membership continues to be presented as a strategic objective, even as references to Russia and China as long-standing partners remain part of the same discourse. These strands do not neatly converge. Such public signaling has normalized the idea that Serbia can integrate economically and institutionally with Europe while culturally and geopolitically keeping one foot in the East.

This article traces the evolution of Serbia's strategic ambiguity from 2012 to 2026, analyzing how it has been sustained and the challenges it currently faces. Coming to power in 2012, Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) shifted from the overt pro-Western stance of its predecessors to a more nuanced position, affirming that EU membership remains a "top strategic interest" while simultaneously strengthening ties with Russia and China. Over the next decade, this ambiguity became entrenched as Serbia invited mutually rival great powers to deepen their footholds in the country.

The discussion spans several interconnected arenas. It first examines how EU accession has been articulated in domestic debate and the uneven record of alignment that followed. It then considers Serbia's ongoing energy and security ties with Russia, which continue to shape its diplomatic posture. China's growing role, especially after the 2023 free trade agreement, forms another critical element, both economically and symbolically. Throughout, attention is given to how ambiguity has become normalized in official language and policy practice. Finally, the article addresses the sharper constraints imposed by the post-2022 international environment, which have narrowed the maneuvering space available to smaller states.

Existing interpretations of Serbia's foreign policy tend to emphasize either pragmatic small-state balancing and hedging in multi-vector relations with the European Union, Russia, and China (Jović-Lazić 2025; Vučković and Radeljić 2024; Stekić and Mitić 2025), democratic backsliding and regime consolidation under stabilitocratic or competitive-authoritarian dynamics (Bieber 2018), or civilizational and identity-based narratives framing Serbia's enduring "in-betweenness" between East and West (Belloni 2023; Ejdus 2020). While each of these perspectives captures an important dimension of Serbia's external positioning, they are rarely integrated within a single analytical framework. This article contributes by bringing hedging (Goh 2005; Kuik 2008), omnibalancing (David 1991), and ontological security (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008) into direct conversation, offering a more systematic account of how external alignment strategies, regime survival imperatives, and identity narratives intersect in the Serbian case.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since 2012, Serbia's foreign policy has largely established a pattern of avoiding a definitive geopolitical alignment. At the same time, it has maintained working relationships with competing actors. Ambiguity here is not a temporary tactic or the result of indecision, but a stable approach to managing foreign policy obligations. Strategic ambiguity, in this context, refers to how Serbia positions itself: it does not commit clearly to one bloc over another and leaves its actions open to multiple interpretations. It avoids steps that would foreclose other options and make future adjustments more costly.

However, ambiguity alone does not explain how such a position is sustained in practice. This role is filled by hedging, which refers to the structure of specific policies: diversifying

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partnerships and distributing cooperation across areas to prevent dependence on a single power center (Goh 2005; Kuik 2008). In Serbia's case, this involves developing relations with the EU and the United States while simultaneously maintaining political and economic cooperation with Russia and China, without formally altering its strategic orientation. Sectoral division, trade, energy, security, and infrastructure, allows these relationships to advance without mutual exclusion. Thus, hedging functions as an operational mechanism that enables strategic ambiguity.

However, foreign policy rationality alone cannot explain the durability of this pattern. Omnibalancing introduces an internal dimension: leaders of weaker states shape foreign relations to safeguard political survival (David 1991). For Serbia, the EU is the main trade partner and source of investment and financial assistance; Russia supports Serbia's stance on Kosovo and remains a key energy partner; China finances and builds infrastructure projects and provides loans without demanding political reforms. Foreign policy flexibility, therefore, becomes a resource for internal stability, reducing the political costs of clear alignment.

The third level of explanation relates to identity. Ontological security assumes that states strive to preserve continuity in their self-understanding and avoid actions that would destabilize established narratives about themselves (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). In Serbia, the question of Kosovo and narratives regarding sovereignty are central to political identity (Ejdus 2020). National identity simultaneously incorporates both European and Orthodox-Slavic elements. A clear geopolitical alignment would require prioritizing one element over the other, potentially creating an internal imbalance. Strategic ambiguity allows these elements to coexist, reducing narrative risk.

This framework thus operates on three analytical levels: strategic ambiguity describes the pattern of foreign policy positioning; hedging explains how this pattern is operationally maintained through the diversification of relations; omnibalancing clarifies its internal political utility; and ontological security accounts for the stability of identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to analyze Serbia's routinized strategic ambiguity in foreign policy since 2012. It draws on multiple sources of evidence, including official government documents, international agreements, speeches and statements by Serbian and foreign leaders, media reports, and secondary scholarly analyses, to trace the evolution of Serbia's foreign alignments and discourse. Within each thematic area, process tracing is employed to link key events and decisions, such as the signing of Serbia's EU accession agreement, energy deals with Russia, or major Chinese investment agreements, to shifts in policy or rhetoric. Particular attention is given to official discourse to examine how foreign policy choices are justified. The corpus consists of publicly available speeches, interviews, and official documents, with inclusion limited to texts that explicitly state Serbia's foreign policy position.

The study period begins in 2012, when a new government under the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was formed, signaling a shift toward a more multifaceted foreign policy, and extends through 2025 into early 2026. By this time, the consequences of the Ukraine war and intensified US–China rivalry had largely materialized for Serbia. This longitudinal scope allows for

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observation of both continuity and change: continuity in the patterns of hedging and strategic ambiguity, and change in the external pressures influencing Serbia. The research also employs triangulation across sources; for example, claims of Serbia's "military neutrality" in strategic documents are cross-checked against military cooperation activities, while Serbia's compliance with EU foreign policy is assessed through EU reports and statements from EU officials.

SERBIA AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE ACCESSION PARADOX

Since the early 2000s, Serbia's official strategic goal has been EU membership, reaffirmed in nearly every government platform and presidential address. On paper, Belgrade has made notable progress: it gained EU candidate status in 2012, opened formal accession negotiations in 2014, and by the mid-2020s had initiated more than 20 negotiation chapters. Serbian leaders routinely describe EU integration as the country's "civilizational choice" and emphasize that Serbia's future "belongs in Europe." Nevertheless, this pro-European narrative has coexisted with partial compliance and, at times, open contravention of EU norms, particularly in foreign and security policy. The result is a profound paradox: even as Serbia edges closer to the EU, it has simultaneously retreated from alignment with Brussels in critical areas.

A clear illustration is Serbia's alignment, or lack thereof, with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). As a candidate country, Serbia is expected to gradually harmonize its foreign policy positions with those of the EU (Jović-Lazić 2020). Reporting shows a notable decline in alignment after 2014: it fell from 99% in 2012 and 89% in 2013 to 62% in 2014, when Russia-West tensions escalated, and Serbia did not join EU measures related to Crimea (European Commission 2012, 2014). By August 2022, alignment had dropped to 45% (European Commission 2022), rising to 63% in 2025 following Serbia's participation in several individual statements and decisions. Sanctions against Russia were not introduced (European Commission 2025).

The EU remains Serbia's largest trading partner and donor. These economic and institutional incentives have encouraged Belgrade to maintain the appearance of a steady European course. Domestically, the idea of EU membership has remained popular, though support has waned amid a decade of stalled progress and the EU's own internal crises. When confronted by the Financial Times in 2022 about choosing between East and West, Vučić responded that Serbia "will not cave in" to such pressure and that "we have our own side, Serbia's interests" (Dunai 2022). By invoking historical grievances, Vučić justifies to the Serbian public why the country should not be quick to adopt Western sanctions or follow Brussels' directives unconditionally.

This delicate balancing act has led Kakarnias (2025) to describe Serbia as a "stalemated" candidate, institutionally in the EU waiting room but normatively drifting away. Serbia's scores in democracy and press freedom indices have declined markedly between 2012 and 2024, weakening the EU's transformative leverage. At the same time, the EU has been reluctant to withdraw the prospect of membership for geostrategic reasons: anchoring the Balkans in the West is seen as essential to prevent rival powers from filling the vacuum. This broader geopolitical urgency has arguably enabled Serbia's sustained strategic ambiguity.

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Brotherhood or Bargaining Chip: Serbia's Relations with Russia

Of all Serbia's external relationships, its tie with Russia is the most emotionally charged and, in many respects, the linchpin of its strategic ambiguity. Russia occupies a unique place in the Serbian national imagination, revered by many as a Slavic Orthodox "big brother" and protector, particularly on the issue of Kosovo. In contrast, others view it pragmatically as a source of energy and diplomatic leverage. The result is a carefully calibrated alignment with Moscow: intense cooperation in certain domains and symbolic camaraderie, combined with occasional token divergences that do not cross Kremlin red lines.

On the security front, Serbia has increasingly intertwined itself with Russia, albeit in an unofficial capacity. After 2015, Belgrade began participating in regular joint military exercises with Russian and, occasionally, Belarusian forces, such as the annual Slavic Brotherhood drills, signaling a sense of fraternity. Serbia also became an observer in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Parliamentary Assembly in 2013, a status that allowed it to attend meetings without committing to collective defense obligations. Perhaps most significantly, Russia has become a key patron of the Serbian Armed Forces' modernization, donating MiG-29 fighter jets and additional armored vehicles, thereby reinforcing defense ties. By the early 2020s, Serbia's arsenal bore a heavy Russian imprint, even as the country simultaneously engaged in NATO's Partnership for Peace program. This duality did not go unnoticed in Brussels: concerns grew that Serbia's use of Russian (and later Chinese) military technology could hinder interoperability with NATO or EU missions. When Serbia acquired a Chinese FK-3 missile system in 2022, its first purchase from Beijing, some EU officials quietly warned that such systems were "incompatible" with Western frameworks (Dunai 2022).

Economically, energy dependence cements the Russian link. Serbia relies almost entirely on Russia for natural gas, with over 89% of imports historically coming from Gazprom (Hess 2025). Russia's Gazprom Neft holds a 56% stake in Serbia's national oil company, NIS, which controls the country's only oil refinery. Vučić has cited this "crucial" dependence on Russian gas to justify not aligning with EU sanctions. In mid-2022, even as the war in Ukraine raged, Vučić secured a new gas supply deal with Putin, obtaining favorable pricing and extended deliveries, a reward, effectively, for Serbia's loyalty in avoiding sanctions. Moscow has been explicit about its expectations: in October 2022, Russia's deputy foreign minister visiting Belgrade warned that imposing sanctions would constitute "political suicide" for Serbia (Beta 2022). The Serbian government took this seriously, not only because of fear of energy retaliation but also because sanctions would alienate a sizeable pro-Russian constituency and undermine Russia's diplomatic support, particularly at the UN regarding Kosovo.

As a result, Serbia has treated sanctions as a hard line it will not cross, while remaining flexible on other gestures. It voted in favor of UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the invasion and suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Nevertheless, it simultaneously refused to implement any sanctions or restrictive measures, thereby diverging entirely from EU policy. Moscow's response underscored that the true litmus test was sanctions: as long as Serbia remained outside the sanctions regime and continued to voice "traditional friendship," the Kremlin tolerated its other forays toward the West as a manageable inconvenience (Jović-Lazić 2025).

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Diplomatically, Russia has been an invaluable ally for Serbia on the issue of Kosovo, forming a core rationale for the close relationship. Since Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, Russia has consistently supported Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo and has used its UN Security Council veto to block Kosovo's admission to the UN. For Serbia's leadership, regardless of party, this backing is indispensable; no other major power provides such unequivocal support on this issue of national importance. In return, Serbia often aligns with Russia in international forums beyond the Kosovo question, frequently abstaining or voting against resolutions that Moscow opposes, apart from the notable exceptions related to Ukraine discussed earlier. High-level visits have been frequent: Putin received Serbia's highest state honor, the Order of the Republic, during a lavish visit to Belgrade in 2019, and Vučić has traveled to Moscow regularly.

From Russia's perspective, Serbia represents a rare foothold in Europe. The Kremlin appears content that Serbia remains outside NATO, refuses sanctions, and continues cooperative projects, such as energy and defense procurement. On a few occasions when Serbia drifted slightly, for example, when domestic pressures led Belgrade to cancel joint military exercises in 2020, or when leaked US intelligence in 2023 suggested Serbian weapons had ended up in Ukraine, Moscow's response was surprisingly restrained. Vučić deftly managed the arms-to-Ukraine controversy by asserting that any such transfers were commercial re-exports beyond his government's control (Landay and Vasovic 2023). Moscow accepted this explanation, likely because maintaining the broader relationship was paramount. The unwritten understanding has been clear: as long as Serbia does not formally side with the West against Russia, Russia will not turn against Serbia.

However, this relationship is not without costs for Serbia. Dependence on Russia has limited alternatives, particularly in energy, where few substitutes exist if supplies were disrupted. Politically, the pro-Russia stance constrains Serbia's EU prospects, leading to exclusion from certain regional initiatives and a degree of mistrust from certain neighbors. However, Vučić has calculated that the benefits outweigh these costs. Domestically, the Kremlin connection strengthens regime legitimacy: it bolsters national pride by signaling that Serbia is not isolated and maintains a superpower ally. This is a classic example of omnibalancing, using an external partnership with Russia to stabilize internal control through both material support and ideological alignment.

The Dragon's Embrace: Deepening Serbia's Ties with China

Serbia has cultivated a fast-growing partnership with the People's Republic of China, adding a third vector to its already ambiguous foreign policy. If Russia is Serbia's historical and emotional partner, China serves as its developmental and strategic investor-partner, a relationship largely free of the historical baggage that accompanies Serbia's ties to Europe or Russia. Over the span of a decade, China transformed from a relatively minor actor in Serbia into one of the country's most prominent non-Western investors and an increasingly visible political ally. Belgrade has actively courted Beijing, viewing China's rise as an opportunity to secure capital, infrastructure, and global influence without the political conditionality associated with Brussels. This "Eastern option" has strengthened Serbia's hedging strategy, providing an external

prop that diversifies its great-power connections beyond the traditional West-versus-Russia framework.

The surge in Serbia–China relations began in the mid-2010s, coinciding with China's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the "16+1" cooperation format with Central and Eastern European countries (later 17+1). High-level exchanges proliferated: President Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Serbia in 2016, the second ever by a Chinese head of state, during which the two countries announced a "comprehensive strategic partnership."

Economically, Chinese investment and loans have transformed segments of the Serbian economy. A flagship project was the 2016 purchase of the Smederevo steel mill by China's Hesteel Group (HBIS). China is financing the Serbian side of the Belgrade–Budapest railway upgrade through soft loans, with Chinese contractors implementing the work (Stekić and Mitić 2025). In the energy sector, a Chinese company is constructing Serbia's first large thermal power plant in decades, the Kostolac B3 coal power block, also funded through Chinese credit.

China has also expanded into Serbia's technology and security sectors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's "mask diplomacy" in Serbia garnered global attention (Verma 2020), reinforcing Serbia's pivot to China in the eyes of the international community.

A landmark moment in the partnership came in 2023 with the conclusion of the China–Serbia Free Trade Agreement, Serbia's first free trade deal with a major global economy outside the EU. The FTA allows roughly 90% of goods to trade tariff-free, with about 60% of tariff lines reduced to zero immediately upon entry into force (Xinhua 2024). The agreement underscored the political will on both sides to institutionalize long-term economic interdependence. For China, Serbia serves as a strategic foothold in Europe, often described as China's "gateway to the Balkans." For Serbia, China is not only an investor but also a great-power backer that, unlike the West, firmly supports Serbia's sovereignty claims.

The relationship has been accompanied by symbolic and soft-power gestures (Marković Khaze 2021; Dragojlo 2021). However, the Serbia–China partnership is not without its contentious aspects. The EU has grown cautious about China's expanding footprint in the Balkans, including Serbia. European policymakers have openly debated how Chinese investments might influence Serbia's EU accession, though as of the mid-2020s, there is no formal "China clause" in the accession criteria (Tenev 2025). Environmental concerns related to Chinese-run factories have sparked local protests, signaling that not all segments of Serbian society embrace unchecked Chinese investments. Nevertheless, the Serbian government has largely dismissed such concerns, calculating that the immediate economic benefits and the strategic diversification away from sole reliance on the West outweigh potential drawbacks.

In conclusion, the Serbia–China partnership has become a critical pillar of Serbia's foreign policy, providing economic ballast and diplomatic cover that enable Belgrade's multi-vector strategy. Whereas Russia supplies Serbia with security leverage and emotional-political backing, China offers development leverage and a model of alignment with a rising non-Western power. Together, these relationships allow Serbia to claim influential partners in both the East and the West.

As with Serbia's other foreign-policy pillars, the deepening of ties with China is closely monitored by Western actors and may affect the sustainability of Belgrade's ambiguous stance. Should great-power competition intensify, Serbia's embrace of China, illustrated by the free trade agreement and expanding technological cooperation, could become a point of contention

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with Brussels and Washington. This may ultimately force Belgrade to make more difficult choices regarding regulatory alignment, security policy (e.g., 5G infrastructure), or potential future Western restrictions on China. For now, however, Belgrade continues to reap the benefits of what it frames as a "win-win" partnership with Beijing (Stekić and Mitić 2025).

Consolidated Ambiguity: Domestic Signalling and Routines

By the mid-2020s, Serbia's multi-alignment strategy had evolved from a series of tactical maneuvers into a durable, routinized policy pattern woven into the fabric of state policy and domestic discourse. This is evident in several ways. First, formal policy documents enshrine the principles of neutrality and diversified alignment. Serbia's National Security Strategy (last revised in 2021) explicitly identifies military neutrality as a core tenet, committing Serbia to neither NATO nor any other military bloc, while emphasizing equal "partnership cooperation" with both Eastern and Western powers. Similarly, the Strategy of Defence (2019) stresses guarding against potential threats "based on military neutrality," effectively codifying ambiguity as an official protective stance (Mihaylov 2024). Such language in strategic documents provides bureaucratic legitimacy to what might otherwise appear as a transient political tactic.

The narrative of ambiguity is reinforced across government and media. State-controlled tabloids, which enjoy wide circulation, frequently praise Russia or China while simultaneously highlighting Serbia's EU-funded projects or the importance of maintaining good relations with Brussels, normalizing a dual reality. Polling data reflect this complex public sentiment: recent surveys show that a plurality of Serbians prefer to "align with neither East nor West" in global disputes (BCSP 2022; IRI 2024). Domestic opposition to Vučić often accuses him not of excessive ambiguity, but paradoxically of being too close to one side or the other. That Vučić can be criticized from both directions indicates he has successfully charted a middle course, the essence of strategic ambiguity, and uses state institutions to maintain this stance as the commonsense position.

Public ceremonies and diplomatic gestures are carefully choreographed to reinforce this balancing act. Within a single year, Serbia might host NATO officers for a Partnership for Peace exercise while separately receiving Chinese or Russian military hardware in a televised ceremony. Government spokespersons praise European investments one week and Sino-Russian projects the next. This narrative of Serbia as a besieged but principled state, "not choosing sides but choosing Serbia," has been a consistent refrain (Jović-Lazić 2025). It frames strategic ambiguity almost as an existential imperative: Serbia must navigate this middle path to survive as Serbia.

This routinization is also evident in how strategic ambiguity transcends individual issues and becomes an all-of-government approach. Whether in defense procurement, energy contracts, or United Nations voting, Serbian officials consistently apply the same hedging logic. For example, when Serbia was invited to join a new EU initiative to purchase gas to reduce dependence on Russia jointly, it simultaneously held talks with Gazprom on a new long-term gas supply, ensuring that both an EU and a Russian option remained on the table.

In the security domain, after years of reliance on Russian and Chinese weaponry, Belgrade surprised many by deciding in 2022–2023 to purchase French Rafale fighter jets, reportedly in a deal worth billions of euros. France's president welcomed the move as "an opening toward a strategic change" for Serbia, potentially signaling a tilt toward the West.

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However, Serbian defense officials framed the decision not as a shift away from Russia but as part of a broader strategy of balancing and diversification. They emphasized that Serbia continues to maintain and upgrade its existing Russian equipment and that the Rafale purchase was about seizing opportunities that benefit Serbia's security, rather than signaling alliances. In other words, even a procurement that could symbolize alignment with the West was narrated as an extension of multi-directional cooperation. The presence of multiple foreign vendors in Serbia's arsenal, Russian MiGs, Chinese FK-3 missiles, French Rafales, Airbus helicopters, and more, serves as a practical metaphor for Serbia's foreign policy: a small quantity of everything, to avoid overreliance on any single partner (Stekić and Mitić 2025).

Another pillar of this approach is the echo of Yugoslavia's non-alignment. Serbia's diplomats frequently cite Belgrade's legacy as the host of the Non-Aligned Movement's founding in 1961. In October 2021, Serbia hosted a major NAM 60th anniversary conference, attended by over 100 countries (Marković Khaze 2021). While Serbia no longer holds full membership in NAM, retaining only observer status, the event's symbolism was significant, linking today's strategic ambiguity to a proud historical narrative of neutrality and global stature. It is important to note that this ambiguity is not without governance challenges. Some Serbian analysts worry that constantly playing all sides can produce inconsistencies and a lack of long-term strategy, a form of strategic drift. However, Vučić's highly centralized decision-making style has thus far managed these contradictions by concentrating foreign policy authority in the presidency and a close inner circle, ensuring a unified message externally even if internal processes remain opaque.

The cumulative effect of this routinization is that Serbia's multi-vector foreign policy has become deeply ingrained. It is no longer a temporary posture but the default setting of Serbian statecraft. A generation of Serbian diplomats and officers has grown up with the credo of "both EU and Russia, plus China" as normal. State media editors have learned to oscillate coverage accordingly. This institutionalized and cultural embedding implies that reversing course, suddenly choosing a clear side, would represent a profound political, institutional, and psychological shift.

THE 2022 SHOCK: ASSESSING THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 proved a watershed moment for Serbia's foreign policy, stress-testing its strategy of strategic ambiguity. On one hand, Serbia surprised some observers by joining the UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity. This represented perhaps the maximal anti-Russian step Serbia felt it could take, a largely symbolic act, given that the UNGA resolution carried no enforcement power, which signaled to the EU that Serbia was not fully endorsing the invasion. Vučić and his diplomats framed these votes as consistent with Serbia's own principle of territorial integrity, given the situation in Kosovo, portraying them as both justified and necessary.

However, outside the UN, Serbia firmly refused to impose any sanctions on Moscow, as previously detailed. The government cited everything from Serbia's wartime memories to energy dependence to justify this refusal (Dunai 2022; Jazeera 2025). The public framing was particularly notable: Serbian officials claimed they were under unbearable pressure from the West to sanction Russia, while simultaneously under pressure from Russia not to, "both East and West

are pressuring us," Vučić lamented (Bieber 2023). Casting Serbia as a victim of a proxy tug-of-war became a defensive narrative to justify inaction.

By late 2022, EU officials openly stated that Serbia would need to align with sanctions if it wished to advance toward membership. In diplomatic demarches, Western envoys in Belgrade warned that Serbia's stance was unsustainable in the long run, emphasizing that a "future in the EU" requires a clear strategic choice.

Simultaneously, Russia's demands, though largely limited to avoiding sanctions, grew sharper. The Kremlin expressed displeasure at Serbia's UN votes and its modest attempts to signal distance from Moscow's actions. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov scheduled a visit to Belgrade in June 2022 to reinforce ties. However, the visit had to be canceled when Serbia's neighbours, all EU/NATO members, denied overflight rights, effectively isolating Serbia logistically. The incident underscored Serbia's vulnerable position: geographically surrounded by NATO and EU states, its practical room to maneuver is constrained (Bieber 2023).

Throughout 2023 and 2024, pressures mounted from both sides. The European Parliament passed resolutions calling for the suspension of Serbia's accession negotiations if Belgrade did not sanction Russia. While non-binding, these resolutions conveyed a strong political message. The United States also increased pressure, notably imposing sanctions in 2023–2025 on Serbian entities linked to Russia, including the state-owned gas company, which was indirectly affected by its Russian parent company (Al Jazeera 2025). In October 2025, US sanctions on NIS, Serbia's oil company controlled by Gazprom Neft, came into effect, generating significant concern in Belgrade and prompting discussions about reducing Russian ownership. Serbia's critical infrastructure was now directly affected by its straddling stance, and the costs of ambiguity were beginning to translate into tangible consequences.

From the East, Russia and China continued to court Serbia, but with implicit expectations. Moscow continued to provide energy on favorable terms and refrained from punitive measures; yet, as the war in Ukraine intensified, Russia arguably became more reliant on Serbia as a friendly transit route. For example, Serbia refused to join a ban on Russian overflights, making Belgrade's airport a rare gateway for Russian travel when EU airspace was closed. China, meanwhile, proceeded with the FTA and deepened economic ties during the conflict, signaling that it was unconcerned by Western disapproval and perhaps viewing Serbia as increasingly strategically valuable amid East-West decoupling. However, escalating China–US tensions, over Taiwan or other issues, could create a similar litmus test for Serbia in the future.

In 2025, a sense of urgency permeated Belgrade's foreign policy circles. Western officials adopted blunt language, insisting that Serbia "must decide" whether it remains on the European path (Jović-Lazić 2025). Russia, embroiled in a protracted conflict, is less able to offer incentives and may eventually demand more explicit support. For example, if a ceasefire vote were to arise, Russia might expect Serbia to break entirely with the West. The space between the blocs has undeniably narrowed, making principled ambiguity harder to justify when great powers frame their rivalry in existential terms.

The Ukraine war also reshaped regional dynamics, further constraining Serbia. Neighboring countries, even traditionally friendly ones like Hungary, adopted sanctions and largely followed EU measures, leaving Serbia more isolated in Europe. Domestically, the conflict further polarized public opinion: hardline nationalists became more openly pro-Russian, while a small pro-Western liberal segment warned that Vučić's fence-sitting was jeopardizing Serbia's

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future. In response, the regime doubled down on its media narrative: anyone advocating sanctions or distancing from Russia was branded an "agent of Western influence" attempting to provoke a Ukraine-style conflict in Serbia (Ejdus 2024). Thus, strategic ambiguity continues to function not only as an external balancing strategy but also as a domestic survival mechanism for the ruling elite.

In concrete terms, Serbia has sought to extend the timeline of its ambiguity, hoping for a more favorable external environment. This strategic temporizing is itself a hallmark of hedging, attempting to survive until circumstances, perhaps a period of multipolar détente, allow ambiguity to remain viable. However, this may be wishful thinking. The war in Ukraine marked a structural break: a return to a Cold War–like bifurcation in which small states can no longer hedge as freely. As Jović-Lazić (2025) warned, "deepening polarization narrows options," and if a new Cold War fully emerges, whether West versus Russia or West versus China, countries like Serbia "will face ultimatums."

Signs of this are already evident. Serbia's stance has undermined EU unity and the credibility of its enlargement policy, and EU leaders are increasingly intolerant of a candidate aligning with EU foreign policy only 45% of the time. Conversely, any move toward NATO membership or openly allowing Western military aid to transit to Ukraine would likely provoke Moscow's ire. Even steps that might appear modest, such as hosting European training missions, must be carefully calibrated by Belgrade.

In essence, the Ukraine war called Serbia's bluff. It demonstrated that Serbia's carefully maintained posture could withstand a major shock, but at a high cost and with heightened precariousness. Serbia did not collapse under pressure from 2022 to 2025; Vučić even won re-election in 2022 by a large margin, campaigning on stability and neutrality. However, the long-term trajectory remains unsustainable. Serbia has managed to sit on three chairs, the EU, Russia, and China, for some time, but those chairs are drifting apart. In the coming period, absent a geopolitical easing, Serbia will likely need to relinquish at least one chair to avoid falling. The Discussion section will explore possible futures and the theoretical implications of Serbia's predicament. However, one point is clear: 2022 marked the moment when strategic ambiguity stopped being easy for Serbia and began becoming an increasingly heavy burden.

DISCUSSION

Serbia's decade-plus experiment in strategic ambiguity offers valuable insights into the foreign policy behavior of small states. It also raises a critical question: Can Serbia's ambiguity endure in the emerging geopolitical order, or is it approaching a strategic expiration? Belgrade's simultaneous courting of the EU (and, to a lesser extent, the US) alongside Russia and China aligns closely with the defining feature of hedging: avoiding overcommitment to any single partner to guard against uncertainty. In doing so, Serbia has also engaged in what might be called "dominance denial," seeking to prevent any single external actor from exercising disproportionate influence (Kuik 2008).

Foreign policy has been closely tied to the regime's internal interests. This pattern reflects a key omnibalancing insight: leaders use external alignments to manage domestic threats and consolidate power. Vučić has balanced between foreign powers to neutralize potential bases of opposition; pro-EU urban liberals cannot accuse him of isolationism,

nationalists cannot accuse him of selling out to NATO, and so on. Serbia's hedging has also allowed Vučić to signal to EU actors that he is a stabilizing bulwark against regional chaos, "don't push too hard, or Serbia might swing fully East," while simultaneously convincing Russia and China that he is a reliable foothold in Europe.

This dual strategy has been effective to an extent, but it relies on external actors accepting that they need Serbia as much as Serbia needs them. The war in Ukraine is disrupting that calculation. Western powers are now less willing to tolerate local autocrats who hedge with adversaries, an evolution that omnibalancing theory would predict when the external threat (Russia or China) is perceived as more pressing than internal stability concerns. Serbia's strategic ambiguity, long sustainable under conditions of multipolar flexibility, is increasingly constrained by these shifting geopolitical realities.

The ontological security dimension in Serbia's case helps explain why strategic ambiguity has resonated broadly with the public and endured over time. Serbia's identity, oscillating between a European and a Slavic/Eastern orientation, finds expression and reassurance in the government's "both/and" foreign policy. At the same time, insisting on eventual EU membership reinforces another layer of identity: that Serbia is a European nation destined to reclaim its place within that community. Strategic ambiguity thus allows Serbia to avoid an identity crisis at the state level.

However, this approach carries external risks. Research by Vučković and Radeljić (2024) notes that Serbia's practice of "diplomatic diversification to the limits of absurdity" projects the image of a small state unsure of its orientation, potentially eroding other actors' trust. This constitutes an external form of ontological insecurity: other states cannot form stable expectations of Serbia because its behavior remains highly context-dependent. The question of sustainability is pressing. While strategic ambiguity was rational and feasible during 2012–2020, it increasingly collides with the hardened structure of international politics after 2022. As a non-aligned or hedging state in an era of renewed superpower rivalry, Serbia confronts the stark question: "Are you with us or against us?" (Vučković and Radeljić 2024). Historically, Yugoslavia navigated the Cold War by co-founding the Non-Aligned Movement, leveraging a bipolar structure to its advantage. Today, however, Serbia is smaller, economically more dependent on the West, and landlocked by NATO and EU members, all factors that limit its ability to play one side off the other.

Several futures are possible. First, Serbia may be forced into alignment sooner rather than later. If the EU maintains that no progress will occur without sanctions on Russia, Belgrade might conclude that it cannot afford to alienate the West and make the difficult choice to distance itself from Moscow. Alternatively, if the EU accession process continues to stall or the EU loses appetite for enlargement, Serbia could double down on alternative partnerships, potentially drifting toward a quasi-Eurasian orientation. A third scenario is that Serbia attempts to maintain ambiguity until external conditions change, such as a shift in leadership among great powers that permits renewed détente.

From a theoretical perspective, Serbia's experience refines our understanding of hedging's limits. When great-power competition intensifies into clear antagonism, hedging options narrow, and states may be forced to transition toward outright balancing or bandwagoning, a process sometimes called "de-hedging" (Stekić and Mitić 2025). Signs suggest Serbia is approaching such a junction. Some Western policymakers suspect Serbia is effectively

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bandwagoning with Russia and China under the guise of hedging. In contrast, some Russian observers suspect Serbia is inching toward the West despite friendly rhetoric. Both indicate that Serbia's ambiguity is losing credibility. Once trust erodes, hedging can collapse, leaving the state in an untenable position: neither side trusts the hedger. Serbia must tread carefully, as the worst-case outcome is isolation and vulnerability, the very condition Vučić's hedging was designed to prevent. In the West, following Serbia's refusal to sanction Russia, some EU voices have begun questioning whether Serbia should be allowed to advance toward membership at all. This dual skepticism may only intensify in the coming years.

Vučić's leadership has proven highly adept at buying time. If he perceives that the threat to regime survival from not choosing a side outweighs the threat from making a choice, he could recalibrate. Recent civil protests and an opposition boycott have hinted at cracks in the aura of stability. Should ambiguity begin to erode public support, for example, if Chinese projects trigger environmental backlash or Russian ties lead to economic harm via sanctions, he may gradually shift policy in a new direction, ideally while preserving domestic narrative and face.

Serbia's experience underscores a broader lesson: strategic ambiguity is a powerful tool for small states, but it works best in conditions of moderate rivalry. It can become untenable in extreme great-power competition. It also demonstrates that ambiguity is easier to sustain when a state's internal politics and identity mirror its foreign policy ambiguity. Serbia has been able to maintain hedging partly because its society and history encompass both pro-Western and pro-Eastern currents. In a society uniformly oriented toward either bloc, the leadership likely could not have justified such a long-standing multi-vector approach. In this sense, Serbia illustrates how domestic and international factors can mutually reinforce a foreign policy posture.

Serbia's trajectory carries broader implications for the European security order. A tilt toward the West would mark the last major piece of ex-Yugoslavia integrating into the Euro-Atlantic orbit, aside from the unresolved Kosovo issue. A tilt toward the East, in contrast, could establish Serbia as a foothold of Russian and Chinese influence in Europe, a scenario that remains a key concern for NATO and the EU. While Serbia is a small state, the stakes surrounding its strategic choice are disproportionately high. In European policy circles, Serbia is often cited as a test case for the EU's ability to shape and transform its neighborhood.

CONCLUSION

Under Vučić's leadership, Belgrade managed to court the European Union, embrace Russia as a traditional ally, and welcome China as a new strategic partner, all at once. This strategic ambiguity, sometimes lauded as shrewd pragmatism and sometimes criticized as duplicity, delivered tangible benefits. By 2026, however, the costs and contradictions of this approach had become increasingly apparent. Serbia's EU accession process has stalled. Its refusal to join EU sanctions has isolated it from the Western consensus on European security, casting doubt on its reliability as a partner. Meanwhile, even as Chinese ties deepen, symbolized by the 2024 free trade agreement, they cannot substitute for the political and geographic reality of Serbia's European setting. In short, pressures from both East and West are shrinking Serbia's strategic room for maneuver.

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The war in Ukraine fundamentally constrained Serbia's strategic ambiguity. It intensified the binary pressure on Belgrade to "pick a side." So far, Vučić has doubled down on the narrative that Serbia's only side is its own, invoking the trauma of the 1990s to justify refusal to sanction Russia, while simultaneously appealing to European aspirations to avoid aligning too closely with Moscow (Dunai 2022; Bieber 2023). Serbia's gestures of friendship toward Russia and China have grown more conspicuous as it seeks to reassure those partners of its loyalty.

Serbia's case validates many predictions of hedging and omnibalancing. A small state can achieve a degree of autonomy and benefit from multi-alignments. Nevertheless, it also underscores a key limitation: hedging is inherently time-bound. Continued ambiguity eventually risks diminishing returns or outright failure, especially if the international system crystallizes into adversarial blocs. Serbia appears to be approaching that juncture. As one analysis presciently noted, a new Cold War could render Serbia's neutrality "untenable," forcing the country to face ultimatums from both sides. Early signs of this dynamic are already visible.

None of this means Serbia's fate is sealed or that a dramatic realignment is imminent. Vučić has proven to be a resilient and agile political operator, and Serbia may still find ways to prolong its delicate balancing act, hoping for an easing of global tensions. Domestic change also remains a wildcard. A future government, particularly in a post-Vučić era, could redefine Serbia's national interest more decisively toward the EU, or tilt more openly toward the East.

The coming years will determine whether Belgrade can maintain this multi-vector strategy in an increasingly polarized world or whether strategic ambiguity will ultimately give way to a clearer alignment.

This study focuses primarily on Serbia's foreign policy since 2012 and its interactions with the EU, Russia, and China from 2012 to early 2026. It does not fully capture potential shifts under future Serbian governments, changes in domestic public opinion, or the influence of unforeseen global events such as economic crises or regional conflicts. Additionally, while this analysis emphasizes official discourse, policy documents, and international agreements, it cannot account for all informal or behind-the-scenes negotiations that may shape Serbia's foreign policy. Finally, the theoretical framing of hedging, omnibalancing, and ontological security provides a structured lens but may not capture every nuance of Serbia's behavior, particularly in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment.

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CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of this article, as well as its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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