

Western Balkans as a Laboratory of Dominant Diplomacy. NATO and the Role of Multilateral Diplomacy in the 1990s-2000s

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Abstract

Since the fall of the communist regimes, the Western Balkans have been characterized as an unstable region with an urgent need for intervention by international actors. As a region with distinct characteristics and considering the crossroads of geopolitical interests of major powers, international organizations have played a crucial role. During the period of the 1990s-2000s, traditional security-related issues such as armed conflicts, and non-traditional issues like terrorism, organized crime have emerged. Given this diverse and highly dynamic picture in an even more dynamic region, the possibility of intervention using various methods and strategies by the international factor has been significant and necessary, making international organizations powerful actors in terms of this region's security. This study aims to highlight the application of dominant diplomacy in resolving disagreements in the Western Balkans. To analyze how this approach has affected the course of events and the consequences on the international order based on the theory of international relations (neoliberal theory), as well as the role and effect that International Organizations have in the international system and their impact on the stability and security of this region. To achieve this goal, the study will aim to address the following issues: present the problems that existed in the Western Balkans during the period

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of the 1990s-2000s, related to armed conflicts; highlight the cases of intervention by International Organizations and analyze the impact they have had on improving or not the conflict situations in the Western Balkans; emphasize the importance and increasing impact of International Organizations as implementers of dominant diplomacy; analyze the impact of the strategy of dominant diplomacy on international security and regional stability.

Key words: *security, regional security, Western Balkans, international relations, International Organizations, NATO.*

I. Introduction

The Western Balkans, a region marked by ongoing instability between 1990 and 2000, was a focal point of multiple conflicts and tensions. This volatile atmosphere resulted from the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, demographic diversity, aspirations of Serbia for hegemony, and strategic interest from Russia to exert influence. Consequently, the region turned into a geopolitical hotbed, witnessing a clash between two starkly different models: the liberal democratic model, led by the U.S., and the autocratic model championed by Russia.

The chessboard for these overarching clashes was primarily multilateral forums and side events, which amplified the presence of international organizations and their crucial role in shaping inter-state relations and political developments in the Western Balkans. Additionally, persistent conflicts and the ensuing tension brought a pervasive lack of order and stability, not only within the region but also internally within the countries, resulting in several waves of emigration towards EU member states. This tumultuous landscape necessitated the intervention of international factors for the restoration of order, stability, and regional security. The tactics employed for intervention varied from soft power strategies, which were predominantly applied in situations marked by intense conflict, to instances where hard power came into play. In the context of this study, the focus is on International Organizations as influential actors in the Western Balkans' regional security, with specific emphasis on NATO and their implementation of Coercive Diplomacy.

Coercive Diplomacy is a strategy that aims to influence an adversary's decision-making process by threatening or using limited force, without escalating to full-blown war. In the context of the Western Balkans, Coercive Diplomacy has proven to be successful for several reasons. First, the countries in the region were emerging from a period of conflict and disintegration, and the threat or limited use of force served as a significant deterrent against any escalations. Second, the international



community, particularly NATO, held considerable influence and could exercise significant pressure.

While other forms of diplomacy include preventive diplomacy, which involves diplomatic actions taken in advance to prevent disputes from escalating into conflicts; shuttle diplomacy, where an intermediary travels between two nations to negotiate peace; and public diplomacy, which involves interactions with foreign public to influence their governments, the focus of this study is Coercive Diplomacy. The diversity of diplomatic strategies reflects the complex and dynamic nature of international relations. However, in the Western Balkans' case, Coercive Diplomacy emerged as an effective strategy due to the specific geopolitical and historical context. Nonetheless, as the region continues to evolve, other forms of diplomacy may gain relevance, underscoring the need for continual reassessment of diplomatic strategies.

Theoretical Approach - Coercive Diplomacy

“It is difficult to argue that there is still a special core of the field...Our field should primarily be interested in relations between states and those between societies and non-state actors to the extent that these relationships jeopardize relations between states and influence them” (Holst, 2002: 621).

Theories are lenses through which we can construct a clearer picture of the analysis of events and not only. In the field of International Relations, they are very important.

The neoliberal approach is a very good way to understand the dynamics of international organizations, international conflict, and of course general cooperation. We are dealing with a theoretical approach to International Relations that is based on two main concepts, that of rationality and agreements. In this theory, the main focus is on the central role of institutions and organizations in international politics. States must agree to establish some common standards and must resist the temptation to violate them (Keohane, 1990). International organizations facilitate the respect of these standards and stabilize meeting points and constant relations between states, on the one hand, providing forums and on the other hand, having a monitoring function. It should be noted that we are dealing with an international economic and political environment that is highly institutionalized, international organizations are the ones that play an important role in the international distribution of wealth and power. Also, the fact that institutions were seen as a way to facilitate problem-solving in terms of coordination, gave a different meaning and value to the operation of international organizations.

International institutions, so important in neoliberal theory, are basically an increased attempt by states to create alliances and cooperation. A fundamental claim of neoliberal theory is that states calculate the costs and benefits of different actions and choose the course of action that will guarantee them higher net gains (Tim Dunne, 2007:154). As Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye show, international organizations and security institutions are platforms with international subjectivity, which produce international norms and occupy an important place in the hierarchy of sources of international law. As such these multilateral forums not only guarantee meeting points but influence negotiation strategies, gather information and convey this to certain actors thereby increasing the level of predictability. Moreover, they determine the agenda, obligations, and guide the interests and approaches of states on certain issues.

Regarding the events of the 1990s, neoliberal theory provides the best explanation. NATO's case demonstrates how international institutions took control of the situation and restored peace and stability in the region, under the leadership of the North Atlantic Alliance. In this context, we must highlight the primary role of the USA. The main tool for achieving this goal was what is called Coercive Diplomacy in the sphere of International Relations.

Coercive Diplomacy

“Coercive diplomacy means resolving crises and armed conflicts without resorting to full-scale war” (Collins, 2006). In other words, coercive diplomacy is a type of responsive strategy aimed at influencing or affecting an opponent based on limited force and threats to prevent preemptive actions. Practically, through coercive diplomacy used as a strategy against the adversary, the latter is given the choice between compliance and non-compliance. An instance of the use of coercive diplomacy was the use of airpower in Kosovo in 1999. This is a prime example of utilizing limited force as part of the coercive diplomacy strategies. In this case, the adversary, against whom this strategy is employed, has to choose to withdraw from the actions it is taking or face the attacks.

The term “limited force” is a demonstrative or symbolic usage, as it actually implies a sufficient force that demonstrates the determination to give credibility to the use of greater force if necessary. The air campaign that NATO undertook in the case of Kosovo is an instance of successful use of coercive diplomacy, though there are many objections to this. The question has always been raised as to whether interventions are legitimate based on international law principles, but this requires examining how the imposer acts and what strategy it pursues with the opponent. It should be examined whether the imposer or implementer of coercive diplomacy makes demands knowingly, which are known in advance not to be met by the



adversary. Obviously, the time given to the latter to comply with the demands also matters. If such a case is encountered, it is very evident that the imposer prefers war over convincing the adversary to withdraw.

There are several major theoretical works regarding coercive diplomacy. One of the most influential in this theory is that of Thomas C. Schelling, "Arms and Influence" (1966). According to author Schelling, the necessary conditions are:

- The threat must be strong enough to convince the adversary that the cost of non-compliance would be unbearable.
- The threat must be credible in the adversary's mind, he must be convinced that the imposer has the will and ability to execute it in case of non-compliance.
- The adversary must be given time to accept the demands.
- The imposer must guarantee the adversary that compliance will not bring more demands in the future.
- The conflict is not perceived as a zero-sum game. There must be a level of common interest to avoid wide-scale war. Each party must be convinced that they can gain more from negotiation than by unilaterally trying to take what they want by force.

Following another line of reasoning, researcher Peter Viggo Jakobsen in "Ideal Politics" (1998) identifies some conditions that the imposer must meet to maximize the chances of success with the implementation of his coercive diplomacy. According to Jakobsen, these are:

- Use of threat to use force to defeat the adversary, or to deny him the easy achievement of objectives at a low cost.
- A time frame for compliance.
- A guarantee for the adversary that there will be no demands in the future (in Collins, 2006: 294).

According to Byman (1999), "The imposer must enjoy dominance in escalating the conflict." Based on this expression of Byman, we can explain the failure of Western powers to impose on Bosnian Serbs in 1992-1995. On the contrary, this non-compliance was accompanied by Serbo-Bosnian reactions aimed at weakening Western resolve. Serbo-Bosnians made empty promises to comply with Western demands. Threats of hostage-taking were also typical and frequent, aiming to halt the execution of threats and escalation actions by Western powers.

It should be emphasized that Serbo-Bosnians not only threatened hostage-taking but also implemented their threat with United Nations personnel. This was done to neutralize NATO air strikes between April 1994 and July 1995. Western

powers took effective and immediate measures to reduce the vulnerability of their troops in Yugoslavia.

The use of coercive diplomacy by the West against Bosnia in the period 1992-1995 is a special case study because it involved seven major exchanges of coercive diplomacy. "Each of them involved: acts of aggression committed by Bosnian Serbs, reaction from Western powers in the form of a request accompanied by a threat of using force, and the reaction to this threat by Bosnian Serbs" (Collins, 2006: 297). The case of Kosovo and Serbia is a special case. Most studies emphasize and define the success of coercive diplomacy in binary terms, where it either fails or succeeds, but the conclusion is much more complex when considering the actions taken by the imposer, where the latter may choose partial compliance or may reduce demands during the negotiation process. This is where the uniqueness of the case in question lies, where Serbia met NATO's demands regarding Kosovo in 1999 only after NATO had reduced the number of demands. There are some inevitable difficulties in using coercive diplomacy since it is considered hard and complicated by many factors. "Success ultimately relies on perceptual, psychological, and emotional factors" (Collins, 2006: 299).

The success of coercive diplomacy depends on the opponent's willingness to cooperate or not, hence it exists from the perceptions and miscalculations that can defeat a well-thought-out strategy by preventing its implementation in the targeted country. The imposer must follow a strategy by which to convince, intimidate and at the same time soothe the opponent, and here lies the difficulty of coercive diplomacy, but not only. The opponent may perceive persuasion and submission as humiliating, and this could also be a reason for the opponent's leaders to be labeled as traitors and thus, the risk of their overthrow by democratic or military means may arise.

Naturally, apart from these complications encountered from the use of coercive diplomacy, the very use of it as a response to aggression, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction presents specific problems (Collins, 2006: 300). There are numerous cases that demonstrate this and are particularly difficult because the actors involved and undertaking strategies belonging to coercive diplomacy are aware that the probability of using force against the opponent is high. Starting from a normative approach, coercive diplomacy will not have a high probability of success. This reasoning comes based on the conditions of success that are difficult to fulfill and therefore what remains to be done is to prevent the creation of circumstances that would necessitate the use of coercive or obligatory diplomacy.



Conflicts in Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo- Failures and successes of coercive diplomacy

The Western Balkan region is, regrettably, known for its security problems and for a pronounced and persistent instability among its members, as well as for a slow process of integration into the European Union. To specify, some cases like Bosnia and Kosovo have been studied. In such a tense situation, with conflicts following one after another, International Organizations have found grounds to act and have sometimes been utilized and sometimes not. Most importantly, NATO, as an organization aiming to preserve security, has had the greatest impact on the situation created in the Western Balkans. Undoubtedly, the United Nations has as well.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Yugoslavia was composed of six republics which were otherwise known as historical-territorial communities. Members of each of these republics had rights as specific ethnic peoples determined by a common language, religion, and politics. There was ambiguity between the relationship of the individual republics' rights and the competencies of the federal or central government of Yugoslavia. After Tito's death, the federal system was not strong enough to limit the growing power of the republics. It was inevitable that Yugoslavia would disintegrate, and this process would particularly be painful in Bosnia Herzegovina and Kosovo.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the situation was very tense. This central Yugoslav republic had a shared government that reflected the mixed ethnic composition with a population made up of about 43 percent Bosniak Muslims, 33 percent Bosniak Serbs, 17 percent Bosniak Croats, and about seven percent other nationalities. The republic's strategic position made it a battleground between Serbia and Croatia, which were trying to dominate large parts of its territory.

In November 1991, Bosniak Serbs voted in a referendum to stay with Serbia in case Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) sought independence. In March 1992, there was a referendum which was boycotted by Bosniak Serbs, where more than 60 percent of Bosniak citizens voted for independence. Immediately after this referendum, in April 1992, Bosniak Serbs, supported by the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbia, rebelled by declaring territories under their control as a Serb republic in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through military superiority and a systematic campaign of persecution, they asserted control over more than 60 percent of the country. Also, Bosnian Croats declared their republic with the support of Croatia, undermining

the authority of the Bosniak government. This escalated the situation even further and served as a “casus belli” for a bloody conflict over territories, and for the first time, the policy of “ethnic cleansing” was implemented by Slobodan Milosevic (Zuconi, 1995).

NATO’s role in dealing with the Balkan wars only came after three years. The genocide that occurred in Srebrenica and the attack on the Markale marketplace in Sarajevo in the summer of 1995 set the Alliance in motion. Also, in August and September 1995, NATO undertook a bombing campaign against the Serbs, which marked the beginning of a period of negotiations. “It was a classic exercise in force-backed diplomacy” (Meyer, 2009). There was much controversy and political prejudice at the same time, especially for the hesitation of the USA, the only superpower in the world, to get involved.

The Implementation Force (IFOR), a NATO enforcement force, was allowed to operate following the Dayton Peace Accords, but there were some European member states that insisted on not keeping ground troops in Bosnia without the participation of the United States. It can be said without a doubt that NATO’s hesitation in directly involving itself in ground combat operations was due to uncertainties regarding American engagement.

As for the role of the United Nations in Bosnia, it was not effective at all and left room for debate. Even though there were 14 resolutions, none of them could prevent the war. The resolution related to the arms embargo was entirely unsuccessful. A failure of the international community that cost many civilian casualties.

Kosovo

The Yugoslavian province of Kosovo had about 90 percent of its population being ethnically Albanian. Kosovo’s autonomy was violated by Slobodan Milosevic, the nationalist president of Serbia, in 1991. During Tito’s time, Kosovo enjoyed extensive autonomy.

When this status of autonomy was revoked, there was a counter-response from the Albanian leadership of Kosovo, which adopted a policy of passive resistance and created a shadow parallel administration. Kosovo’s Albanians declared independence in September 1991, but did not receive international recognition. As a result, frustration increased which led some Kosovars to adopt a militant strategy of violent confrontation with the authorities of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), and there was an increase in support for the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The activity and involvement of the latter has been continuously increasing since 1996, always having harsh attacks from the FRY security forces. As a result, there was a reflection from the international community which responded by imposing sanctions on the FRY and also called for talks between the parties to



restore Kosovo's autonomous status. There were negotiations that began in April 1998, but without much effectiveness.

From some analyses made, it is argued that Western governments refused to condemn the beginning of the counterinsurgency by FRY forces in July 1998 with the intention of forcing the Kosovars to participate in negotiations. The Economist wrote that, initially at least, the FRY offensive was "quietly approved by Western governments", on the assumption that "the Albanian side might be thrown into cooperation with Western mediation efforts if it was exposed to a taste of Serbia's wrath".

As for the role of international organizations, NATO was the one that had the greatest role. The latter took the initiative to deploy forces in neighboring countries in April 1998 in order to prevent the spread of the conflict and the start of air strikes against FRY forces, and did so without special authorization from the UN Security Council. Although China and Russia opposed the air strikes, NATO made it clear that it would act militarily to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. This was done without a resolution from the UN Security Council. On October 12, the Italian government and the outgoing German cabinet became the last two NATO countries to approve the use of force.

The NATO threat for military action and to exert pressure on the FRY government to meet the demands of the Security Council, was used by negotiators in Kosovo. NATO ministers authorized air strikes to begin in four days. This happened on October 12, 1998 and meanwhile, the US special envoy Richard Holbrooke, announced that he had received a commitment from Milosevic to meet the demands of the UN Security Council and to achieve a political solution.

There were some responses, especially from Western officials, who admitted that the justification for intervention may be necessary in the future and that the humanitarian situation needed to be improved. However, NATO stated that the humanitarian need brought many reasons for military action and also announced that it would maintain the activation order for air strikes indefinitely in order to ensure Belgrade's compliance. A necessary justification came from President Clinton, in March 1999, when peace talks in Rambouillet ended without an agreement. President Clinton stated:

"We must also understand our actions for peace in the Balkans and Kosovo. This is not only a humanitarian crisis, but it is much more. This is a conflict without natural borders. It threatens our national interests. If it continues, it will spur refugees beyond borders, and attract neighboring countries. It will undermine NATO's credibility, on which stability in Europe and our credibility depend. It is likely to rekindle historical enmities, including those that might embrace Albania, Macedonia, Greece, even Turkey. These divisions still have the potential to make

the next century truly violent for that part of the world that extends to Europe, Asia and the Middle East. I do not believe we should have thousands of people slaughtered and buried in open football fields before we do something.”

Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a statement to the House on March 23, 1999 expressing the three main reasons for the possible use of force in this case. Mainly, the use of force was to “avoid what would otherwise be a humanitarian disaster in Kosovo”, but also because “instability and civil war in part of the Balkans inevitably spread to all and affect the rest of Europe”. Lastly, after “promising” that “we would not tolerate the brutal oppression of the civilian population”. He also expressed: “To withdraw now would not only destroy NATO’s credibility, more importantly, it would be a breach of trust of thousands of innocent civilians, the only desire of whom is to live in peace.”

There were three air strikes which had been determined since the fall of 1998 by NATO’s military campaign. The strikes that took place in the first phase of strategic bombing, were against the air defense system and aimed to reduce the ability of Serbian attacks against the civilian population of Albanians in Kosovo. However, there was no great success as these attacks were limited and at a great height. Another reason was that the Serbs had never activated their radars and other defensive means, and this made it difficult for NATO to discover them. The reason for planning such a limited attack was that the belief prevailed that Milosevic would surrender very quickly. The fact that this belief turned out to be wrong and Milosevic did not agree to surrender, as well as the military actions that did not damage the Serbian air forces, were reasons to move to the second phase of strategic bombings.

In the second phase, it was planned to expand the attacks to other Serbian military points, as well as military points in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kosovo, and the city of Nish. The second phase included military infrastructure, including warehouses and air spaces, as well as ground military forces (Daalder and Michael, 2000). The main goal of this phase was to paralyze the means that aided the paramilitary, military and Ministry of Internal Affairs forces. In this phase, the allies lost an F117 aircraft to Serbian forces. Despite the intensification and expansion of attacks in this phase, it was not possible to damage and even less to convince Milosevic to accept the proposed agreement. Thus, began what was called the “second phase plus”.

During this phase, it was decided to also attack the civilian infrastructure which was intertwined with the army, such as radio, television and even Milosevic’s residence. This strategy was planned to be implemented in the third phase, but some NATO countries, including Germany, Italy, Greece and France, expressed the desire not to activate the third phase. Pushed by this, America proposed



authorizing the NATO Secretary General, Javier Solana, to decide in the future to attack Serbian military sites. In April and May, several civilian settlements were also attacked. Such a strategy of gradual escalation was supported by Washington and the Clinton administration, which believed that Milosevic would capitulate very quickly.

A gradual limited planning and such a strategy pursued by NATO had its flaws, but in the end it was successful. The success was the cessation of the war and the achievement of the agreement which was a great victory for the USA and NATO, but most of all for the people of Kosovo, who won their freedom and independence.

The Legitimacy of NATO's Intervention in Kosovo: Coercive Diplomacy as a Means of Guaranteeing International Law

Serbia's aim was ethnic cleansing, expelling Albanians from their native territory in Kosovo towards Albania and other neighboring states. President Bush had warned Serbia "that in the event of a conflict in Kosovo, conditioned by Serbian actions, the U.S. would be prepared to use force in Kosovo and within Serbia itself (Bacevich, 2002).

The American administration feared that if Milosevic was not stopped, it would cause a series of problems and conflicts on a large scale. Clinton declared that he "will not allow ethnic cleansing," a call to which European allies, first and foremost Britain, France, and Germany, also joined. In fact, these countries not only aimed to prevent ethnic cleansing, but also to stop a broader conflict in Europe. Another reason was to prevent the creation of a Greater Serbia through violence.

Therefore, among the three main reasons for this intervention, the first was humanitarian, the second aimed to maintain regional security, and the third had a normative character aiming to preserve international rules of peace. In some analyses, the theory is defended that sovereign nation-states, according to UN resolution, cannot be attacked if they have not attacked another state, or in NATO's case, any of its members. However, many others see the humanitarian action in Kosovo as legitimate.

A concrete example is the Dutch Minister of the Interior, who said: "If this action is not in accordance with international law, the problem is not with the action, but with the existing international order" (Raičević, 2008). From the Yugoslav perspective, it is said that "what happened during NATO's intervention in Kosovo was nothing less than an act of aggression, contrary to peace and inconsistent with the traditional international law of the principle of territorial sovereignty (Joyner, 2002).

The Security Council resolutions for Kosovo provide a full legal justification for intervention (Raičević, 2008), "someday they will understand that the UN Charter

is not the only source of international law” (Raičević, 2008). Based on the UN’s universal declaration of human rights, humanitarian intervention implies a threat or use of force outside state borders carried out by one or more states to prevent or halt the severe violation of basic human rights of individuals who are not members of that or those states, and without the permission of the state where violence is used.

Then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, during a conference in London, expressed: “The reason why the international community is so focused on what is happening in Kosovo is: to a large extent, the humanitarian disaster of tens of thousands of people crying and making noise in the hills and the coming winter” (Alexander, 2000). The US has favored NATO’s air strikes as a means to halt violence in Kosovo. It has interpreted resolutions 1199 and 1203 of the Security Council to justify its policy. The Clinton administration believed it had a moral obligation to intervene in Kosovo, even without explicit approval from the Security Council, as this was the only way to save the ethnic Albanian population (Alexander, 2000).

Therefore, it is clear how the “moral imperative” has dominated the principle of national sovereignty through schemes for future intervention for regional agreements to protect human rights when the Security Council fails to take action in crisis situations. We are dealing with the new doctrine of humanitarian intervention. “The rhetorical affirmation of the doctrine of permanent intervention was particularly clear in the triumph of NATO’s operation in Kosovo (Kissinger, 2005). The mission in Kosovo was a victory for progressive forces in foreign policy according to Tony Blair. “This war was fought for a fundamental principle necessary for the advancement of humanity: that every human being, regardless of race, religion, or birth, enjoys an inalienable right to live free from persecution (Blair, 1999).

Conclusions

The Western Balkan region, regrettably, is prominently distinguished by its ongoing security challenges and persistent instability among its member states. This situation substantially impedes the progression and integration of the region into the European Union, an objective long sought by its nations. This is exemplified by geopolitically complex scenarios such as Bosnia and Kosovo, which have both been the subjects of extensive studies. Amidst the backdrop of these continuous and successive conflicts, a variety of international organizations have found a fertile landscape for intervention, with varying degrees of success and efficacy. This observation leads to the assertion that these organizations’ roles are sometimes exploited, and at other times, their presence is inadequately capitalized.



Prominently, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), whose primary mandate revolves around the preservation of international peace and security, has played an influential role in shaping the existing socio-political situation in the Western Balkans. The United Nations, the European Union, and many other international organizations have also made valuable, albeit less extensive, contributions to the complex dynamics of the region.

The security of the Western Balkans is influenced by a plethora of factors that continually shape the region's security agenda and dictate its priorities. Undeniably, the Western Balkans, from a geopolitical perspective, commands as much attention as it demands from various state and non-state actors. However, the region's stability is not confined within the parameters of its geographical boundaries. The issue extends beyond these physical boundaries due to the phenomenon often referred to as the "spillover effect," where threats and phenomena spread on a scale larger than the region. The interconnected nature of these threats necessitates reciprocal cooperation among nations to mitigate destabilizing factors in a region that has historically been burdened by various problems.

The regional conflicts that swept across the Western Balkans during the 1990s wreaked widespread devastation and left an indelible mark on the region. These conflicts confronted shared security and foreign policy objectives with profound existential challenges. In this context, the involvement and proactive engagement of international organizations emerged as critical to not only quelling the raging flames of conflict but also fostering an environment of order, stability, and prospective growth.

The theme explored in this context holds significant value in the field of international relations and could provide a robust foundation for future research. Neoliberalism, predominantly a materialist theory, lays significant emphasis on the influence of the distribution of material power - manifested as military strength and economic capabilities - on the balance of power among states and their consequent behavior (Jackson, Sorensen, 2007: 162). It is evident that despite initial resistance, the strategy of imposing diplomacy in international relations, particularly demonstrated by NATO's role, proved effective in the Western Balkans.

NATO, as one of the most influential international organizations in the Western Balkans, was at the forefront of conflict resolution throughout the tumultuous period of the 1990s to the early 2000s. Although other organizations played significant roles in the process, NATO's distinctive profile and military capabilities positioned it as the principal entity in resolving regional conflicts. Its influence has continued to expand and solidify since this period. Moreover, NATO's efforts have played an instrumental role in fostering the democratic development and stability of the region, demonstrating the long-term impact of its interventions.

Using NATO's intervention in Kosovo as a case study provides interesting insights. This action was largely well-received and considered successful by many Western states. The intervention reflected NATO's adaptability and resilience in the face of complex geopolitical challenges. Each subsequent challenge and crisis arguably reinforced NATO's strength and relevance, further asserting its importance in maintaining regional stability. It shaped the evolution of the Western Balkans as a security complex and consolidated peace within the traditional conceptual framework.

Given the region's historical complexities, weak states lacking institutional capacity and socio-political cohesion can pose myriad threats to national and regional security. In light of this, ongoing collaboration and a united front are essential to prevent and mitigate such security threats.

The prospect of EU membership for Western Balkan countries could serve as a substantial incentive for political stability and security in the region. However, the EU's approach to the region has predominantly been one of benign neglect. The lack of significant EU engagement has tarnished its image and credibility in the Western Balkans. This has inadvertently paved the way for the rise of other international actors such as Turkey, Russia, and China. Consequently, it is crucial for these actors, along with the EU, to respond proactively by enhancing their efforts to promote democratic principles and tackle the wide range of threats confronting the Western Balkan region. As security risks could have far-reaching implications both within the region and in its relationships with the EU and NATO, an informed, swift, and united approach is essential to ensure stability and prosperity.

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