

# **Wings of Change: Coming Drone Proliferation in the Western Balkans**

## MIND Publications

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In [December 2022](#), much heat was raised in Serbia when Kosovo announced that it was interested in buying Bayraktar unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) manufactured by Turkish defence contractor Baykar. This news came in the background of tensions that emerged when Kosovo Serbs, in protest, blocked the roads in North Kosovo close to the border with Serbia, demanding the formation of a Community of Serb Municipalities from the Kosovo government, as stipulated by the 2013 normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. This episode might signify things to come with the Western Balkans, and that is the proliferation of armed drones by the countries of the Western Balkans.

The reasons for this potential proliferation of armed drones are multiple. They include first the fact that drones are becoming an unavoidable hallmark of the global security landscape, used by superpowers like the US and in various regional conflicts worldwide. Second, the fact that Serbia is ahead of its neighbours in the number of drones it operates creates an impulse with its neighbours to match that capability. Third, the extant regional arms control regime in the Western Balkans has loopholes related to the more modern weapons systems like drones. Fourth, the acquisition of weapon systems like drones is a powerful political instrument for local nations to increase their regional and international bargaining power, as well as for the powers supplying them to boost their influence in the Balkans. Finally, investing in armed forces, including acquiring modern systems like drones, is a powerful method of domestic political promotion for the local elites. This combination of factors makes regional drone proliferation in the Western Balkans highly probable.

The first reason for the proliferation of drones concerns the fact that drones have monumentally transformed the nature of military conflict and global security. The US military contributed significantly to the rise in the use of armed drones. Strongly influenced by [long and costly ground wars](#) that the US waged in Iraq and Afghanistan in the post-9/11 era, [drone strikes](#) cost less and does not involve risks to the army personnel of a country resorting to them, but they also increase the number of unintended targets that are hit frequently resulting in civilian casualties. During the Obama Presidency, there were [540 drone strikes](#) conducted largely in Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia. Some estimated that this was [almost eleven times](#) increase in the number of drone strikes compared to his predecessor, George W. Bush (50). Donald Trump's administration removed a whole set of restrictions, giving greater latitude to the local commanders related to the use of drones and raids by special forces, including an exemption to the rule of "near certainty" that there would be no civilian casualties. As a result, while data remains unclear, Trump [surpassed Obama](#) in the number of drone attacks in the first two years of his presidency compared to Obama's first two years. In addition, the [Biden administration](#) is reinstating the old legal and operational checks on drone strikes. At the same time, the US pullout from Afghanistan and the decreasing intensity of conflicts in Syria and Iraq will probably result in fewer drone strikes.

Nevertheless, the genie is out of the bottle. The whole of the Balkans is faced with [a serious demographic decline](#). In [Serbia](#), the largest country in the Western Balkans, the armed forces are struggling with the massive drain of military professionals. According to [the 2021 assessment](#) of the Serbian Military Union, almost 10,000 professionals quit the military over five years because of unsatisfactory conditions. If the drones are a satisfactory means for the world's mightiest country, the US, to reduce the financial cost and risk of life loss, it is also tempting for demographically haemorrhaging Balkan countries to take care of their military requirements at an affordable price and reducing the risk of losing limited manpower.

The Balkan countries also observe how others are employing drones. The list involves [Russia](#), [China](#), [Israel](#), [Iran](#) and potentially [non-state actors](#). However, one country, [Turkey](#), stands out in terms of attractiveness for local nations, with its Bayraktar TB2 drones. These drones have been used most famously in [the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war](#) by Azerbaijani forces against Armenian troops and in [the ongoing war in Ukraine](#) by Ukrainian forces against Russia. In [February 2023](#), Serbian Defence Minister Miloš Vučević noted to the Serbian media that the Serbian military is analysing the experiences of these two conflicts before assessing drone acquisition.

The absence of arms control regimes governing UAVs makes drones highly appealing to countries in the region. To begin with, the production, use and export of drones is not regulated comprehensively at the global level, but in a rather fragmentary and incomplete fashion. The matter is particularly under-regulated when it comes to autonomous drones that are AI-driven and do not require human pilots, the so called "killer robots". All countries in the Western Balkans have ratified the legally binding [Arms Trade Treaty](#) (ATT), although some of the main drone producers including the US, Russia, China, Israel and Iran are still not part of it. ATT implicitly covers drones, but it lacks a mechanism for verifying information provided in national reports and enforcing compliance. The [United Nations Register of Conventional Arms](#) (UNROCA), which also includes armed drones, has an even worse reporting record, and the Western Balkan states are no exception. Furthermore, these countries are not part of the [Wassenaar Arrangement](#), a non-binding mechanism for export controls for conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies, including drones. WA also does not include some of the main drone producers, such as Israel, China and Iran. Additionally, the 1996 [Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control](#), modelled after the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty, does not extend to drones. As a result, there are currently no measures to prevent a drone arms race or ensure transparency regarding drone arsenals, domestic development projects, and planned acquisitions.

Another reason why drone proliferation in the Western Balkans is highly likely is the desire of other countries of the region to match the capabilities that Serbia has

acquired. In [June 2020](#), China delivered to Serbia six CH-92A drones manufactured by the state-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), with their combat radius exceeding 250 kilometres, with two FT-8C missiles able to hit a target from a distance of nine kilometres. The acquisition of these drones already made Serbia [the largest drone operator](#) in the Western Balkans. This transaction did not only involve the acquisition of military hardware but also technology transfers that allowed Serbia to complete its drone project [Pegaz \(Pegasus\)](#). [Serbia](#) also has at its disposal the drone “Obad” equipped with a 64mm four-barrel rocket launcher “Zolja” and the drone IKA-20 that can be equipped either with 60mm revolver mortar or with a rocket launcher “Osa”.

There are other potential partners for Serbia regarding drone acquisition. For example, in both [2020](#) and [2022](#), Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić expressed Serbian interest in Turkish Bayraktar drones, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan allegedly promising them to Belgrade in 2022. While this transaction never materialised, there would be a good foundation to do as, in [2019](#), Turkey and Serbia signed a defence cooperation agreement, making it possible for Ankara to transfer technology and “know-how” to Belgrade and use it as a springboard for the European defence market.

While there were reports in late 2022 that Serbia was among the countries interested in buying [Iranian Shahed 136 or “kamikaze drones”](#), this did not happen as it would have been too dangerous for Belgrade to be engaged in such a transaction as these drones are being [used against Ukraine by Russia](#). Instead, Serbia decided to buy “kamikaze drones” from [the UAE](#) after President Vučić attended International Defense Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) in Abu Dhabi in February 2023. [The drones in question](#) are probably RW-24 drones manufactured by Halcon, a subsidiary of a UAE state-owned conglomerate EDGE Group. Serbia will use this transaction to complete its project of a swarm drone system Gavran (Raven).

Serbia’s procurement of Chinese drones and plans to acquire Turkish, Iranian, or Emirati drones have caused concern in the region, as other countries have also announced their intentions to purchase armed drones. [Albania](#) already signed a contract to acquire three Turkish Bayraktar drones. Soon after, [Kosovo](#) expressed an interest in the same drones, prompting Serbian [President Vučić](#) to say that this transaction would affect relations between Serbia and Turkey if it materialised. Before that, in [late 2021](#), Bosnia’s army chief visited the “Bayraktar” factory in Turkey, raising suspicion that Bosnia and Herzegovina is also among the potential buyers

Some countries have been less forthcoming about their drone arsenals but have been actively engaged in their development. In March 2023, it was reported that [Croatia](#), like [North Macedonia](#), is believed to possess Israeli drones capable of being armed (Hermes 250) and had recently conducted secret tests of other kamikaze

drones. These trends do not imply that hostilities are imminent, but when one country acquires a new defence system, it changes the strategic environment, and its neighbours want to match it.

What also makes the future proliferation of drones more likely is that weapons acquisitions are frequently tools of power play for both local and supplier nations. Serbia frequently buys weapons from various countries in both the Western and non-Western world as a political investment in good bilateral ties with these countries. When Serbian leadership wanted friendship with Emmanuel Macron, it bought Mistral, an infrared man-portable air-defence system from [France](#). When Vučić first flaunted the idea of buying Bayraktar drones from Turkey in 2020, it was done after he met Turkish President [Erdoğan](#) in Istanbul to mend ties as Ankara was [displeased](#) over Belgrade pledging to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

In 2021 Serbia wanted to get out of the embassy move deal with [Israel](#) while still keeping the protection of Israeli lobby groups in the US; it began negotiating with Israeli defence contractors on arms purchases. In late 2021 Serbia bought Kornet anti-tank missile systems from Russia as compensation for the preferential gas price deal that Serbia secured from Russia. Meanwhile, by [getting weaponry from multiple sources](#), it is following its hedging policy and trying to boost its bargaining power with the West on issues like Kosovo. By purchasing drones from multiple sources, Serbia will be able to pit various drone suppliers against each other while profiting from technology transfers to become a regional drone supply hub potentially. Others in the Balkans can follow similar logic. Croatia frequently [buys weaponry](#) to prove that it abides by NATO's 2% defence spending threshold. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo can also buy drones from Turkey as part of foreign policy hedging.

Equally important is that drone suppliers also use drone deliveries to increase their political and strategic clout and not just as a commercial transaction. For example, [China](#) is trying to promote itself as a global military power while using Serbia to penetrate the European defence market and circumvent the EU's restrictions on arms trade with China imposed after the suppression of the Tiananmen protests. [Turkey](#) uses weapons delivery and security training to generate stronger political influence in the Balkans, having become aware of the limitations of economic and soft power instruments. [The UAE](#) also has an interest in having access to the local defence industry for weapons supply that can also be distributed to the UAE's proxies in Middle Eastern conflicts. This is another factor that makes future drone proliferation in the Western Balkans more likely.

Populism is another contributing factor to the rise of drones in the Balkans. The armed forces are the most trusted institution in the [region](#), which has led to politicians using the strengthening of the military to gain support, particularly in times of global instability. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in [Serbia](#),

where the military is [traditionally](#) the most trusted institution. Moreover, its media is tightly controlled, and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić, relies heavily on the military to maintain his power. Vučić, a former information minister for Slobodan Milošević, has used the military as a propaganda tool to enhance his popularity and consolidate his grip on power. He frequently cites the military's newfound strength under his leadership, highlighting how it was once weak but now inspires fear in Serbia's enemies. In October 2019, he justified arms procurement by [saying](#): "It's better to be Godzilla than Bambi", obviously under the influence of John Mearsheimer, realist scholar who first [coined](#) this catchy credo for surviving the anarchic world. Frequent news about the acquisition or domestic development of armed drones is extremely useful to enhance Vučić's image as a patriotic, forward-thinking leader with great geopolitical insight. Most recently, the media-military industrial complex reached a new level when the the owner of Pink TV, one of the most vocal mouthpieces for the regime of Aleksandar Vučić, [obtained](#) a license from the Ministry of Defence to produce armed drones. Their products gained prime time coverage during Vučić's visit to the IDEX 2023 arms fair in Abu Dhabi. [Croatia](#), a country involved with Serbia in something of a quasi-arms race, is also no stranger to a practice where politicians use military procurements to score domestic points, particularly during the electoral cycles.

## **Conclusion – Chances of War and Policy Recommendations**

This combination of outlined factors will create a very inducive environment for regional drone proliferation in the Western Balkans. The inclusion of these new armed drones might change the military balance of power in the Western Balkans. The war in the region [remains unlikely](#), though. Most of the Balkans remains under NATO's protection, either through membership or the presence of NATO's peacekeepers, like the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo. Even Serbia has an institutional link with NATO as it exercises Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) within NATO's Partnership for Peace program, the highest level of cooperation between NATO and non-member states. The mentioned problems of demographic decline, departure of cadres from the armies, and lack of economic capacities also make full-fledged inter-state war in the region less likely.

Nevertheless, the presence of drones without adequate checks risks the region. This is because drones allow for the potential use of force against the neighbouring country more likely. This could come either in case of an accidental clash or because drones create a psychological and political atmosphere of low risks, thus opening space for potential misperception leading to the use of force. UAVs can also be employed in low-intensity conflicts sparked by populism. This was the [case](#) during the so-called 2015 Weekend War in North Macedonia when the government clashed with an insurgent group in Kumanovo, an incident [widely suspected](#) to be orchestrated by the government itself.

There are ways in which this process can be made less dangerous. The first one is for the local nations to work on, including drones in the mechanisms of regional arms control, either by updating the existing agreements or by negotiating new ones. This effort will be difficult as, on a global level, there has not been a unified effort to regulate the use of drones primarily because the leading military powers and drone producers were unwilling to invest their efforts in such an initiative. All countries in the region should be much more transparent when it comes to their drone production, acquisition and use by updating their military doctrines as well as through more regular and comprehensive reporting to UNROCA, ATT and OSCE. Since all countries in the region are seeking membership in the EU, the bloc could demand more transparency and caution regarding the acquisition of drones during accession negotiations, particularly within Chapter 31, negotiating chapter which covers common foreign and security policy. The local elites need to be persuaded not to use drones in political sabre rattling but treat these weapons systems as parts of the national military arsenal. How feasible are these policy recommendations in practice remains to be seen. However, without them, it remains more likely that the proliferation of drones in the Western Balkans will occur in a destabilising fashion, even without the outbreak of war.

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