

# BALKAN PACT 1953 AND YUGOSLAVIA\*

*Original scientific paper*  
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*Summary: Balkan pact signed by Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey shortly before Stalin's death on 5th March 1953 was among the biggest achievements of NATO in the first years of the Cold war. A year after Greece and Turkey had joined NATO, Yugoslavia entered the pact with two new NATO member states. NATO had the same strategic challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean like in Scandinavia and Baltic area. The entrance of Greece and Turkey was an equal success as the presence of Denmark and Norway since 1949. Greece was one of the most important members of NATO: the Greek civil war ended in 1949 and country was dominated by the communist ideology with a very strong pro-Soviet mindset. After the breach between Stalin and Tito, the Yugoslav foreign policy was inconsistent: from sponsoring Greek partisans to abandoning and betraying Marcos and Greek communists. Yugoslav foreign policy in the first years of the 50s was at first marked by the confrontation with USSR, but latter with closer relations to USSR that would lead to failure of the Balkan pact. Involvement of Yugoslavia in Balkan pact and possible connection with NATO was an illusion and the result of cold relations between two communist leaderships of Yugoslavia and the USSR. For NATO, the southeast of Europe was equally important as the northeast because of the physical distance from the USSR. That is the reason why Yugoslav situation, to some extent, is comparable with Finland (especially after Finn-Soviet Treaty of 1948). The research will be based on unpublished sources from the National Archives in London, which will give an input on relation of western intelligence services towards Yugoslavia and towards Balkan pact and its founding states. Yugoslavia was showing false signs of approaching West alliance and pursuing anti-Soviet policies. That politic was also a result of poverty and economic situation in which material*

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*help from the West was essential. The events of 1953 in GDR and of 1956 in Poland and Hungary confirmed the Yugoslav pro-Soviet orientation.*

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THE BALKANS ALLIANCE WAS A MILITARY-political alliance active in the early stage of the Cold War, what makes it specific in many ways. It was unique for, while Korean war was still raging, it brought together two NATO members, Greece and Turkey, on one side, and a „renegade” from the Eastern bloc, Yugoslavia. Having in mind characteristics of social-political systems and differences between alliance members in a bipolar world, forming of such regional concord made unprecedented political exception, if not absurdity. The idea of military union of Balkan countries was not new, and different Balkan alliances were formed on several occasions in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Terzić 2008). Links formed in 1953 were result of feelings of endangerment, not of territorial aspirations as was the case with first Balkan alliances. Closer relations and friendship treaty, as well as latter military alliance of Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia were caused by threat from potential aggression by USSR and/or its satellites (Laković 2008). The most threatened state among those three was Yugoslavia. Greece and Turkey became NATO members in 1952, so other members were obliged to react in case they were attacked by some other country. It could be said Greece and Turkey after 1952 were very unlikely to become a target of Soviet Union. On the other hand, after the breach between Stalin and Tito in 1948 Yugoslavia became the first „renegade” from communist bloc, so military conflict between Yugoslavia and USSR and its allies became very probable during 1948 and 1949 (Luberić 1994). Outbreak of Korean War in 1950 substantially decreased probability Soviets and their allies will attack Yugoslavia, while Stalin’s death in 1953 marked the beginning of the end for tense relations between USSR and Yugoslavia. After 1953 and Stalin’s death Eastern bloc countries themselves became uncertain an institutionalized military cooperation was beneficial. Yugoslavia had other motives for cooperation and alliance besides Western financial support, necessary in those years for Yugoslavia’s survival (Laković 2006). For Yugoslavia a military cooperation with NATO members, Greece and Turkey, was very important because of Trieste crisis and tense relations with Italy because of unsolved territory issues. After the summer of 1954 forming of military alliance, i.e. turning of Treaty on friendship and cooperation between three countries into a military defense alliance helped Yugoslavia to attain better negotiation positions for ending Trieste

issue (Luberić 1994). Probably the most important result of this military alliance after Stalin's death was acquiring additional negotiation assets for reconciliation between Tito and Khrushchev: making pact with NATO members while evading to enter NATO or start negotiations in that direction put Yugoslavia in clear position as neutral towards Western alliance, giving it additional prestige in a Socialist bloc (Bogetić 2000). Although it appears as a paradox, alliance with Greece and Turkey was for Yugoslavia a very important prerequisite to normalize relations with Soviet bloc.

Interests of Greece and Turkey were overshadowed by 1952 when those two states joined NATO. Civil war in Greece ended in 1949, after Tito ceased helping Greek communists. Tensions between Yugoslavia and Greece ended and after joining NATO Greece considered its boundaries were secured despite Yugoslav wish to discuss „Macedonian issue” (PRO FO 371/113166<sup>1</sup> Belgrade 20<sup>th</sup> February 1954). NATO membership of Turkey was a success of Turkish foreign policy and additionally secured open Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, an issue Soviets wanted discussed at Potsdam conference. Interests of Greece and Turkey resulted from a need for strengthened NATO influence in the Balkans and Asia Minor which improved positions of those countries. Links with Yugoslavia and its potential joining NATO would strengthen positions of both states in the NATO, but also fully secure Southern wing of NATO and brought about overland connection with Italy, an important issue for NATO positions in eastern and southeast Europe (Dimitrijević 2008). During preparations for the Treaty and latter military alliance interest of USA, as leading Western power, was to slowly bring Yugoslavia under the auspices of the Western bloc. The threat of Socialist bloc attack on territories of three Balkans states ebbed away and that considerably eroded previous unity of these countries over common foreign policy priorities. Differences between two NATO members and one country with communist attitudes became more obvious, so since autumn of 1954 the end of that alliance could be envisaged, and after Soviet delegation visit to Yugoslavia in 1955 the purpose of the alliance was questionable. Events in Hungary next year proved that alliance members belonged to different poles and alliance petered out, despite certain provisions and protocols of previous agreements were ratified by inertia (Bogetić 2008). On the other hand, Greece-Turkey dispute over Cyprus showed the alliance was not functioning even when only NATO partners were involved (Terzić 2010). Relations between Greece and Turkey became even more complicated in second half of 1950s, while Tito and Yugoslavia turned to Non-aligned movement. Tito obtained valuable experience during existence of Balkan alliance and he used it later for neutrality

1 Public Record Office, in further text it will be called PRO, Foreign Office, in further text it will be called FO 78/10.

policy of Non-aligned movement: same as in the case of military agreement with Balkan neighbors, Yugoslavia used neutrality Non-aligned solicited to continue its own „way” towards communism without rejecting financial support from the West (Laković 2006).

Researchers from Balkan countries that studied Balkan alliance often accepted one-sided approach to British attitude towards events in 1952–1954. Unpublished documents give way to conclusion that British position towards the alliance was not bare opposition to military alliance, but primarily reasonable doubt that it will ever function if Yugoslavia do not start process of joining NATO. Initiative for forming of the alliance came from Yugoslavia, for that country had most interest for it: literature on this topic neglected this important fact. British diplomatic and military dispatches enable following evolution of Balkan alliance idea that developed in Belgrade (PRO FO 371/102191 Rome 16<sup>th</sup> May 1952).

Yugoslavia's convergence to Greece and Turkey can be followed through newspapers and news on „neighborly” relations and a need for more intensive cooperation between Yugoslavia and Greece and Turkey (PRO FO 371/102191 Belgrade 25<sup>th</sup> April 1952). Reports on change in attitude towards Greece British diplomats conveyed to the Whitehall, and as reasons stated bad relations with Italy and a fear of Soviets. Converging of these three countries and possibility of political and military cooperation were mentioned in *Jugopress* newspaper in April of 1952.

In the same period, during April British ambassador in Athens suspected that goal of Yugoslav politics and improved relations with neighbors was military alliance that would help Yugoslavia in case of a military attack and would oblige Greece and Turkey to help it (PRO FO 371/102191 Athens 30<sup>th</sup> April 1952).

According to British diplomats dispatches from Balkan capitals and other European cities it became clear that initiative for developing closer relations between Balkan countries originated in Yugoslavia (PRO FO 371/102191 London 26<sup>th</sup> May). As an overture for military delegations meetings that took place towards the end of that year, Yugoslav side initiated parliamentary visits with Greece in summer of 1952. Next exchange of parliamentary delegations Yugoslavia had with Turkey in September of the same year. Anyway, correspondence of ambassador in Ankara and announcement of Turkish minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Korulu, showed that Turkey wanted to build stronger links between Balkan alliance and NATO pact. Possible military cooperation Turkish minister did not conditioned by Yugoslavia approaching NATO (PRO FO 371/102191 Ankara 17<sup>th</sup> June 1952).

By the end of June British side realized that Tito's tactics concerning possible alliance was that after improving neighborly relations he would switch to next phase – building of military-political alliance. As a confirmation of increased

activity of Yugoslav offices abroad and their lobbying it cited that one of the most influential generals and a member of army general headquarters, Peko Dapčević, received for the first time Greek military attaché after refusing to see him in 18 months since his arrival in Belgrade. Greek general headquarters relayed to British colleagues their interpretation of Yugoslav plans for alliance development as a kind of alliance in SE Europe that would weaken Soviet influence and would be unique European security mechanism (PRO FO 371/102191 Paris 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1952), an equivalent to European Defense Community.

In summer of 1952 announcement of three Balkan countries alliance became public secret in European diplomatic and military circles (Bogetić 2008). Italy's position towards possible alliance was reserved and complex: it both supported idea of convergence of three states and remained skeptical towards Yugoslavia's motives for an alliance with two NATO candidates at the time. Italy even expressed its wish to cooperate in a program for common security mechanism for SE Europe, but highlighted it required additional consultations with its allies (PRO FO 371/102191 London 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1952).

The treaty signed by three countries in Ankara on February 28 1953, few days before Stalin's death, was titled *Agreement on friendship and cooperation between Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, Kingdom of Greece and Republic of Turkey*, but Tito's plans actually concurred with news British intelligence had: the first proposal for exchange of ideas and plans of army general headquarters of three states Yugoslav side relayed to Turks through their ambassador in Belgrade already on July 25 (PRO FO 371/102191 Istanbul 26th July 1952). That happened two years before first official conference of three armies chiefs of general staff<sup>2</sup> (Terzić 2008). Assumption that military alliance of three countries could be in future used as an instrument in recruiting Yugoslavia for Atlantic treaty can be found in different sources from summer 1952, but British diplomats and military personnel remained by and large suspicious (PRO FO 371/102191 London 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1952).

First significant military team from Yugoslavia traveled to Athens on September 5–10 to meet members of Greek general headquarters (PRO FO 371/102191 Athens 8<sup>th</sup> August 1952). Interesting detail is that field marshal Montgomery was in Athens at the time. Possible meeting with marshal Montgomery was skipped due to timidity of Yugoslav side, afraid to be seen with the field marshal, reported British representative in Belgrade and his Greek colleague in Belgrade concurred (PRO FO 371/102191 Belgrade 16th August 1952).

Diplomatic news made very important military-political delegations visit Yugoslavia in the second half of 1952 and check possibility Balkan alliance would be formed. Visit by British foreign affairs minister Anthony Eden in September

2 Bled, August 10–14 1954.

and his meeting with Tito could be seen in that light (Terzić 2010). Next step in improving foreign politics position of Yugoslavia was a visit by American general Thomas Handy in November of the same year. In the autumn of 1952. British sources put a lot of effort but could not resolve attitude of Yugoslav side towards NATO, since Yugoslav side always replied either they had no instructions for such talks or it was not included in meeting agenda (PRO FO 371/102191 Athens 6th August 1952). Head of Yugoslav military delegation that visited Ankara on September 24 after visiting Athens, general Jakšić, for the first time publicly announced Yugoslavia would momentarily reply if some country attacked Turkey (PRO FO 371/102191 Ankara 30th September 1952). That announcement was certainly related to hypothetical attack on Thrace Bulgaria could make following USSR instructions or Soviet breakthrough towards straits.

Dispatch from Washington to Ministry of defense in London at the beginning of November 1952 shows that highest military circles in West already knew Yugoslav military mission was ready at best for data exchange and a dose of courtesy (as source cited), so they advised two NATO members, Greece and Turkey, to achieve additional harmonization of their relations and military plans within Western defense mechanism (PRO FO 371/102191 Washington 7<sup>th</sup> November 1952).

End of November and December brought Greek and Turkish military delegations to Belgrade, respectively. Reports of both delegations lead to the conclusion that expectations were not met and either side did not stick to precise agenda. Greek side was very surprised when their Yugoslav colleagues suggested joint military planning on certain topics, something Greeks were not informed about at all (PRO FO 371/102191 Belgrade 4<sup>th</sup> December 1952). Very surprising was offer by Yugoslav general headquarters to show Greek delegation military data and plans never mentioned before, despite realistic assumption Greeks would share them with NATO partners. As reasons for that Brits cited Trieste crisis and wish of Yugoslav side to forestall possible Italian obstruction of further cooperation of Balkan countries (PRO FO 371/102191 London 13<sup>th</sup> December 1952).

Tripartite military meeting was held at the end of December. Greeks and Turks remained puzzled why Yugoslav side was ready to present military data on its capacities and army disposition while still having territorial dispute with another NATO member – Italy (PRO FO 371/102191 Washington 16<sup>th</sup> December 1952).

Preparations for treaty and cooperation with Greece and Turkey paid off to Yugoslavia already at the beginning of 1953, when it received economic support from US government and an international bank (Laković 2006). The only remaining thing that spoiled Tito's plans concerning Balkan alliance was unsolved

Confidential dispatches from Washington from the end of December reveal that meeting with Thomas Handy was important for joint strategy and plans were made in case Soviets attacked Yugoslavia (PRO FO 371/102191 Washington 16th December 1952). That can be considered as an introduction or preparations for opening Yugoslav negotiations with NATO. Confirmation came on January 21 of the next year when, during meeting of foreign affairs ministers of Yugoslavia and Turkey in Belgrade, minister Keprilia pointed the problem of Yugoslav stance towards NATO and presented position of its government that tripartite treaty should be only one stage of the journey that will bring their relations into unison and lead to ultimate goal: Yugoslavia's participation in NATO (Bogetić 2008). Yugoslavia did not accept that but left options for further institutionalization of relations. After Belgrade, Turkish minister visited Athens in order to agree joint position towards Yugoslavia with a representative of Greek government, marshal Papagos.

Ankara treaty that would remain remembered as Balkan treaty was signed on February 28 1953 by three ministers of foreign affairs. By ratifying it, Yugoslavia formally aligned with West, so this event was welcomed in the Western world. Reality that suited Tito and Yugoslavia as one of protagonists was that proclaimed alliance plans ideas were very different to its operational capabilities. That became evident in 1954, and in 1955 the alliance slowly lost any meaning.

Yugoslavia's attitude towards NATO shaped very much joint strategy of three Balkan allies: Greeks and Turks kept favoring conclusions of meeting with Thomas Handy and forming of a military alliance to decrease threat of East European countries attack on the Balkans. The key issue for functioning of Balkan alliance was its relation towards NATO. Turkish side was most in favor of linking with NATO, while Tito evaded that idea (Laković 2008).

Next meeting of military representatives after treaty signing in Ankara took place in Athens in June 1953. The corner stone for further plans was joint attitude that attack on one of the states would be considered attack on all three participating countries. In certain way that presented link between Balkan and Atlantic treaty, for in case of USSR or some of its satellites attacking Turkey or Greece Yugoslavia had to react. By the end of 1953, after several meetings including military conference in Washington (August 1953), Tito's avoiding to make concrete steps to bring Balkan alliance closer to NATO was winning. In November 1953 in Belgrade the Additional agreement was signed that announced forming of a political body – permanent secretariat, instead of a military committee as proposed by Greece and Turkey. During the year a slightly revised plan of Greek general headquarters was accepted concerning joint battleground near Yugoslav-Greek border | 117

and Thrace. This tripartite defense plan specified military component of Balkan alliance (Heinemann 2008).

In January of 1954 British intelligence sources noted there is stagnation in cooperation, so beside exchange on military readiness nothing much happened. As many times before, it was noted that Yugoslav-Greek border, Tracie and straits are strategically the most important belt of Balkan alliance defense from potential enemy (PRO FO 371/113166 London 26th January).

Reports from Belgrade at the beginning of the year cited that Yugoslav officials seemed offended when their partners from Greece or Italy announced that Balkan alliance is step towards stable links and approaching to NATO. Dailies attack Greek prime minister, marshal Papagos, for such statements (PRO FO 371/113166 Belgrade 6th February 1954). In foreign policy terms, 1953 is very important for Yugoslavia because of Stalin's death (Terzić 2010). After consolidating his position, Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev started to converge with Tito. Balkan allies realized after 1955 how important it was for Yugoslavia to establish best possible relations with USSR. British reports from 1954 describe slow change of Yugoslavia's attitude that brings it closer to ideologically familiar USSR (Peilikin 2008).

The anniversary of treaty ratification and a letter from Koča Popović, sent with comments to the Whitehall, best describe futility of Balkan alliance only a year after it was formed, but also that contemporaries saw and interpreted Yugoslav foreign policy as egotistic and inconsistent (PRO FO 371/113166 Belgrade 20<sup>th</sup> February 1954). After a period of improved relations with Western powers since 1952, it became obvious Yugoslavia had various priorities: one of declarative ones was Balkan treaty that from the beginning showed it will not last long since differences between Yugoslavia on one side and Greece and Turkey on the other were too big, so much so that foreign policy goals of Yugoslavia had nothing to do with those of Greece and Turkey. As examples of Yugoslav inconsistency mentioned were Macedonian propaganda and bringing up of „Macedonian issue”, despite alliance between two states. After Reuters relayed news on text by propaganda organ „Glas na Egejcite”, a protest came from Yugoslav state secretariat that Brits want to break the alliance (PRO FO 371/113166 Belgrade 20<sup>th</sup> February 1954)! As a motive for such foreign policy stated was inferiority complex that make Yugoslavia establishment behave like an economy or military power (PRO FO 371/113166 Belgrade 20<sup>th</sup> February 1954). The fact that Yugoslavia had diplomatic relations with 29 countries in 1950, and with 52 four years later explains well importance Yugoslavia gave to relations with Costa Rica or Burma (PRO FO 371/113166 Belgrade 20<sup>th</sup> February 1954). Shallowness of such politics aimed at fascinating own citizens was stated by British source that illustrated it with Tito's visit to Ethi-



opian monarch Haile Selassie when Tito ordered for that purpose special medal „Marshal's star” made of gems and of exceptional value. A need to find friends became so important and present in Yugoslavia's politics that it was normal that leading newspaper headline reads „Important potential of economic cooperation with Costa Rica” (PRO FO 371/113166 Belgrade 20th February 1954).

January 1954 (PRO FO 371/113166 London 26<sup>th</sup> January 1954) both British sources and admiral Dick who was in Paris consider treaty ratified by three states was not in collision with emergency defense plans of Great Britain. In 1954, after Tito's meeting with Turkish government representatives initiative was started to turn Balkan treaty into alliance. Decision to make alliance was made in Ankara after discussion of Yugoslav and Turkish side, so that caused negative reactions in Athens since Greece felt like a junior partner (Terzić 2010). However, Tito visited Athens in June and same agreement was reached like few months before in Ankara. The prime enemy of ratifying the alliance during preparations was Italy because of unsolved Trieste issue. British sources cited Italian concern for premature decisions of Turkey and then Greece to enter an pact with a non NATO country that moreover have unresolved territorial issue with another NATO member: Italy (PRO FO 371/113166 Ankara 4<sup>th</sup> May 1954). Italian worries over Trieste did not prevent forming of Balkan alliance, but USA advised Turkey to slow down quite quick preparations for alliance ratification. Tito's initiative to form the alliance resulted from unfavourable economic situation that force him to better cooperate with Western bloc, at least that is what French and British sources reported from Belgrade in the spring of 1954. Biggest challenge for Western alliance remained relations between Balkan pact and NATO, i.e. what obligations would Yugoslavia accept. French ambassador to Belgrade offered three options on Yugoslavia and its status: 1. entering NATO, 2. special relations between Yugoslavia and European Defence Community (EDC), 3. Acceptance of Yugoslavia into EDC (PRO FO 371/113168 London 18<sup>th</sup> May 1954). By making military defence pact with two NATO members, Yugoslavia obtained protection from the whole Western bloc, but did not accept any obligations. That was the reason for such proposals by French ambassador. However, by the end of summer it showed none of offered options will come true. In May and June British and American sources reported they were worried by rush preparations to turn treaty into a pact. They cited it was wrong to rush and that pact would have no real importance if not supported by NATO or if legal framework for cooperation with NATO is not achieved (PRO FO 371/113168 London 25<sup>th</sup> May 1954).

Italy's opposition to forming of Balkan pact was supported by France and USA, because of Trieste issue and obligations NATO would accept if two of its members sign such an agreement, specially for it carried no similar obligations for Yugoslavia (PRO FO 371/113167 London 11th June 1954). An interesting

turn happened in June when Italy changed its attitude towards future pact (PRO FO 371/113167 Ankara 10th June 1954): Italian ambassador in addressed representatives of Turkish government and stated that Balkan pact would help in finding solution for Trieste issue, something totally opposed to previous attitude. Anyway, the most interesting was proposal that Italy join Balkan pact (PRO FO 371/113167 Ankara 10<sup>th</sup> June 1954). If Italy joined that would certainly be premature, but that did not happen. Initiative for accepting Italy came from Turkey that was instructed by USA (Bogetić 2000), but Great Britain made them not put pressure on Yugoslavia to accept Italy into alliance (PRO FO 371/113167 Paris 17th June 1954). British stucked to a safe policy, they did not want to gamble with existence of the alliance, so they advised USA Italy should join later and only after Trieste issue was resolved (Bogetić 2000).

Preparations to turn treaty into military defence alliance were executed during spring and summer. Signing took place in Bled, Yugoslavia on August 9, when during Bled conference Balkan alliance was ratified as a military alliance for a period of 20 years. Yugoslavia succeeded in its endeavour to have alliance independent of NATO. At the meeting of three general headquarters representatives Yugoslav side emphasized it respected NATO membership of two other allies and obligations their membership brings (Terzić 2008). Possible reason NATO accepted such an alliance that was suitable for Yugoslav side was failure of EDC (European Defence Community), since its establishment was not ratified in French parliament on August 30 1954. Roughly at the same time Trieste issue was coming to an end, finally was resolved on October 5 by signing of London treaty (Bogetić 2000).

Balkan pact signed at Bled conference in August 1954 inherited Balkan treaty signed in Ankara on February 1952 and was special alliance that due to contradictions and different bloc affiliation of its member could not survive bigger foreign policy challenges. By signing the agreement and entering this alliance, Yugoslavia and Tito won a lot without losing anything. They profited by extended financial support from West that was of existential importance for quite poor and isolated Yugoslavia, but also with symbolical importance of the alliance that was used for achieving more respect worldwide, especially in the Eastern bloc and the Third world. Stalin died just before agreement signing, so with new Soviet leadership and in changed circumstances, Tito raised his negotiations capital. Turkey and Greece not much before became NATO members in 1953. Greece ended in 1949 its civil war that was partially financed by Yugoslavia, while Turkey had all of its northern border exposed to potential attack by USSR or its satellites. Balkan agreement, later a pact, were important for security of both countries for they could be certain Yugoslavia will be no threat. According to British sources it was obvious cooperation of three Balkan countries has no big significance if not linked to NATO. Tito, at least judging by British archives and available literature, did not show ambitions for Yu-

Yugoslavia to join NATO or for any obligations towards Western alliance that would distance him from Eastern bloc. Tito used Balkan treaty and pact to strengthen positions for talks with Khrushchev. It could be assumed that experience Tito earned in preparation and realization of Balkan treaty and pact was precious, for later Non-aligned movement was used by Tito and Yugoslavia primarily for personal promotion and giving Yugoslavia more importance in the world than it could deserve by its economy or anything else. The treaty and the pact served their purpose and protected signing countries from attack by USSR or its satellites, the one that became very unlikely after Stalin's death. Anyway, differences between members were large, the world of Cold war was bipolar, and one of the signatories (Yugoslavia) was unwilling to make radical changes in its foreign policy orientation, so pact was not sustainable and remained one of the paradoxes of the Cold war.

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