

Aleksandar Pavić*

Military Academy, University of Defense, Belgrade

Hatidža Beriša**

*National Defense School „Vojvoda Radomir Putnik,”
University of Defense, Belgrade*

STRATEGIC PRAGMATICITY AS A FACTOR IN ACHIEVING SERBIA’S NATIONAL INTERESTS

Abstract

This paper analyzes the concept of strategic pragmatism as a potential framework for achieving Serbia’s national interests. Through a geopolitical, historical, and institutional approach, it is shown that, although Serbia does not have a formally defined grand strategy in the form of a single document, it implements a functional and long-term sustainable strategy that satisfies all the key elements of that concept. Continuity in the formulation of national interests, as well as the application of strategies of containment and risk mitigation, delay, and realpolitik maneuvering, demonstrates a deeply rooted political culture of adaptation to circumstances. The paper particularly emphasizes the importance of a multi-vector foreign policy and the “four-pillar” strategy as instruments for preserving geopolitical neutrality and increasing international flexibility. Strategic pragmatism, viewed through the prism of the *hedging* concept, is a key mechanism by which Serbia seeks to avoid hard choices between opposing global centers of power, while protecting vital interests such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and stability in the region. The paper shows that this approach is not only a product of historical consequences but also a rational

* E-mail: aleksandar.pavic@mod.gov.rs; ORCID: 0009-0005-6737-0094

** E-mail: hatidza.berisa@mod.gov.rs; ORCID: 0000-0002-9432-5273

response of a small state to contemporary challenges in international relations. The paper confirms the hypothesis that strategic pragmatism is not a temporary solution, but a long-term doctrine appropriate to the geopolitical reality of Serbia and a sustainable pattern of action in the global system of unequal power.

Keywords: strategic pragmatism, grand strategy, Serbia, national interests, geopolitics, realpolitik, hedging

INTRODUCTION

“Territory is the foundation of the life of the state, not only in a physical, but also in a political and economic sense.”

The State as a Lifeform, Rudolf Kjellén (Kjelen 1923)

Over more than eight centuries of existence, the Serbian people have developed a relationship towards statehood in which territory represents not only the spatial, but also the spiritual and political basis of existence, which is still present today in the 21st century. The idea of the state as a “form of life” (Kjelen 1923), formulated by Johan Rudolf Kjellén, is deeply rooted in the historical experience of the Serbian people, for whom the state was and remains the highest form of collective existence. Guided by this ideal, Serbs have fought for liberation for centuries, preserved their religious and cultural heritage as the foundation of their national identity, and sought to shape political decisions in accordance with real geopolitical challenges.

Serbia’s position at the crossroads of the Balkans, Europe, and global spheres of interest makes it particularly sensitive to geopolitical pressures. In such a context, the Serbian approach to decision-making has developed as pragmatic, flexible, and based on realpolitik. In international relations, Serbia has applied a strategy that has sought to balance the power of the great powers, in order to preserve sovereignty, sustain economic development, and ensure energy and security stability, i.e., national interests.

The central concept discussed in this paper is strategic pragmatism. Strategic pragmatism can be defined as a flexible, adaptable, and rational approach to long-term political and geopolitical decision-making that rejects ideological dogmatism and seeks to

maximize national interests in the face of limited resources and a changing strategic environment. In the literature on small-state international relations, strategic pragmatism often appears as a necessary response to limited resources, pressure from larger powers, and complex geopolitical conditions. Although the concept is not explicitly defined, its essence is close to concepts such as “realpolitik” (Kissinger 1994) and strategic culture (Snyder 1977; Gray 1999), which emphasize the importance of adaptability and rational decision-making in accordance with national interests. For small states, such as Serbia, pragmatism in strategic planning implies a balance between value orientation and geopolitical reality, as confirmed by analyses of foreign policy of countries in the post-Cold War period (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006). Such an approach does not mean the absence of vision, but rather the flexible application of strategy in accordance with changing circumstances, which is increasingly recognized as a sustainable model for states in sensitive regions (Cooper and Shaw 2009).

The contemporary challenges facing Serbia, such as the unresolved status of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija, migration flows and pressures from multilateral structures, require Serbia not only diplomatic skills, but also the renewal of institutional capacities and the strengthening of mechanisms for the protection of national interests. Pragmatism in this context is not treated as a temporary measure, but as an element of the state’s long-term strategy, while not neglecting the need for partnerships in regional and global frameworks.

The authors hypothesized that strategic pragmatism is a key element in the realization of Serbia’s national interests in the 21st century, in the face of numerous geopolitical challenges and changing international circumstances. Throughout the centuries, Serbia has had to direct its actions towards imposed conditions, while at the same time preserving its national interests, cultural heritage, and independence, a fact that has not changed to this day.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate with arguments that, since the emergence of statehood, the Serbs have had a certain type of strategy for achieving national interests. Although a strategy, grand strategy, or state strategy is not defined as a document, the Serbian people have known in every era, and even today, how to use the available resources, regardless of the various challenges they faced, to shape and achieve national interests. The methodological approach in this paper

is based on a geopolitical and historical approach in the application of the data analysis method. The geopolitical approach allows for an understanding of the strategic pragmatism of Serbia as an adaptive national strategy, conditioned by the state's position in space, historical experience, and the dynamics of global power relations. In contrast, the historical approach is based on the analysis of historical content from documents, where the sources that shaped Serbian statehood and national identity are listed within secondary interpretations. Through a hypothetical-deductive cycle, the most important conclusions related to national interests and strategic approaches were drawn.

The paper is divided into four chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter presents the framework for defining a grand strategy in relation to the most prominent theoretical positions that are acceptable today. The second chapter explains the possibilities of the Republic of Serbia in the context of the geopolitical pivot in the region. The third chapter provides an overview of what the Serbian ethnic community has gone through, observed through the stages of development during the consolidation of the people, nation, and state in the modern sense. The last chapter analyzes national interests and strategic approaches in the post-Yugoslav period and modern Serbia.

APPROACHES TO DEFINING GRAND STRATEGY

Although in international relations theory, grand strategies are most often associated with great powers with global ambitions, research shows that small states can also possess a grand strategy, if they have the capacity for long-term planning, maintaining a stable foreign policy, and directing resources towards defined national goals (Wivel 2021; Arad, Strum, and Tadmor 2017; Shamir 2023). Serbia, a state with limited material resources but with a pronounced strategic culture, historical experience of surviving under pressure from great powers, and clearly articulated national interests, is an example of a small state with elements of a grand strategy. Through a multi-vector foreign policy, military neutrality, institutional ties with the diaspora, and investments in critical infrastructure, it demonstrates the ability to formulate and implement a deeply thought-out strategy tailored to its position and capabilities. This strategy is not formalized in a single document, but is visible through consistency in behavior and

priorities of domestic and foreign policy, which is in line with the modern understanding of grand strategy (Brands 2014). The Serbian example shows that a small state, if it has a mature political culture and pragmatic decision-making, can have a grand strategy aimed not at domination, but at preserving, stabilizing, and achieving national interests.

Although there is no complete academic agreement on its foundation, this has not prevented a large number of strategists and other thinkers from defining grand strategy (Silove 2017). The concept of grand strategy has been defined mainly through theories of political science, strategic studies, and history. The most famous definitions of grand strategy emphasize different aspects of this concept. The theory of strategy, as well as grand strategy, has been mostly concerned with the nations that have embodied and applied this concept over the centuries. There are definitions that emphasize different elements in the creation of grand strategy, for example, in relation to circumstances, instruments of national power, international relations, resources, and historical approach.¹

The first approach is characteristic of the period after World War II and can be attributed to the tendency to maintain global peace and improve the general state of the nation. The first grand strategist who stands out from the others is Basil Henry Liddell Hart. This British military historian defines grand strategy as a concept that goes beyond military victory and focuses on achieving long-term peace (Hart 1952). He emphasizes that grand strategy should encompass “the economic, political, and psychological resources of a nation” in order to ensure lasting peace and avoid unnecessary losses. Hart, as a theorist of the indirect approach strategy, views grand strategy primarily through the realization of interests with minimal losses (Potter 2018).

The second approach is based on the use of instruments of national power. Edward Mead Earle is considered one of the pioneers of grand strategy studies in the United States of America (USA). Earle emphasizes that grand strategy is the synthesis of all national resources: political, economic, diplomatic, and military, in order to achieve national goals both in war and in peace. It directly implies the use of the instrument of national power in achieving goals. This approach is

¹ The analyzed approaches to defining a grand strategy were selected among others in terms of purposefulness, relevance and practical applicability within the framework of research for the purposes of this paper.

characteristic of the school of strategic thinking in the USA (Preston 2021). In relation to Hart, peace is not the ultimate goal but exclusively the realization of interests.

The third approach to defining grand strategy can be seen through the theory of Barry R. Posen. This American theorist of international relations defines grand strategy as a theory that governs relations between the state and the rest of the world. His focus is on how grand strategy manages and balances national security priorities (Posen and Ross 1996). Posen's focus is on international relations, that is, it is the place where vital state interests are protected.

John Lewis Gaddis points us to a fourth approach to defining grand strategy in relation to resources. Gaddis, a prominent American historian and Cold War expert, defines grand strategy as planning that links military, economic, and diplomatic resources with long-term political goals (Gaddis 2018). He emphasizes flexibility and the adaptation of strategy to changing circumstances. Richard K. Betts similarly emphasizes that grand strategy is the basis for comprehensive national policy and involves the combination of resources to achieve the most important interests of the state (Betts 2019). Colin S. Gray, a British expert on strategic studies, believes that grand strategy is the integration of all national resources in the service of achieving basic political goals, whether they are peacetime or wartime. This simple definition focuses on the relationship between resources and goals of strategy, which implies that, in addition to the means of achieving strategy, it is not possible if the goals are not aligned with the available resources (Milevski 2021).

The historical approach as a fifth way of defining grand strategy can be attributed to the historian Paul Kennedy, who studied the rise and fall of great powers, who defines grand strategy as an effort to align a nation's resources with its goals over the long term. Kennedy emphasizes the importance of a balance between national goals and available resources (Kennedy 1991). Similarly, Lawrence M. Friedman, an expert in the history of strategy, believes that grand strategy includes not only planning and resource allocation but also the ability to adapt strategy to new challenges (Freedman 2013).

The above definitions are only part of the thinking of the academic and professional community; however, it can be concluded that all approaches to definition contain several common elements. Grand strategy is related to long-term goals and requires the integration

of all available resources, flexibility, and adaptation to the various challenges, risks, and threats that will be faced during its existence. These definitions show that grand strategy is not just a military, economic, or political activity, but a comprehensive approach that states use to ensure their position and security in the world, while at the same time striving to achieve lasting stability and prosperity.

In accordance with the above approaches to defining grand strategy, as well as the large number of different definitions, the authors of this paper have defined the grand strategy of nations and states such as Serbia as follows: *A state's grand strategy represents a long-term, comprehensive plan aimed at achieving its national interests, such as: preserving sovereignty and territorial integrity, internal political and institutional stability, economic development, regional security, cultural and identity stability, and international influence.* This definition promotes longevity, national interests, and, above all, an international position that must be recognized and acknowledged, both at the regional and global levels.

The previously mentioned definition in the context of Serbia implies that grand strategy also includes active neutrality in international relations, protection of the rights of the Serbian people wherever they live, integration into the economic and political trends of Europe and the world, while preserving strategic independence and a value system based on statehood, freedom, and historical continuity.

SERBIA: A GEOPOLITICAL PIVOT IN THE BALKANS

Certain opinions in the literature point to the importance of perceptions and the role of decision-makers in the process of shaping a grand strategy, especially given the limited information and its subjective interpretation. This paper starts from the point of view that material factors, such as instruments of national power and the geopolitical position of the state, play a key role in creating a grand strategy. The international position of a small or medium-sized state, which is not based on territorial power, economic capacities or strong alliances, but is based on value identity, internal cohesion and the pursuit of international legitimacy, is exposed to numerous challenges due to its limited ability to influence international trends and protect its own interests in a dynamic foreign policy environment. However, the size of the state does not have to be decisive in the context of its

strategic position and geopolitical potential. Trygve Mathisen said that the strategic functions of small states arise from various factors: political, geographical, economic, and military, which are not always easy to identify or separate. However, a change in the constellation of power can fundamentally change the position of a small state (Mathisen 1971). On the other hand, we have large states that have significant prerogatives of power, which manifest themselves through global and regional political influence, the possibility of intervention beyond their borders, and instances of hard, soft, and smart power. In the context of international relations, Zbigniew Brzezinski distinguishes two significant categories of states, namely geopolitical players and geopolitical pivots. He states that geostrategic players are those states that have the ability and strength to actively act beyond their borders and thus expand their political influence in order to achieve their own interests. Geopolitical pivots are states that have a “sensitive position,” through which it is possible to access important areas or to preserve the position of the power under whose control the pivot state is. However, pivots can also be used in the context of generating instability and conflict in areas close to other great powers designated as enemies (Bżeziński 2001, 42–43).

Various factors, as well as circumstances, significantly influence the international position of a nation, but Serbia’s position can be analyzed through two factors. The first factor is that the geopolitical position of the state influences regional developments, that is, it allows for superiority in certain vital areas in the region, but also that it is a factor of interest for great powers (Mearsheimer 2001; Evera 1984). The second significant factor is that the state has specific vital resources that surpass the environment (Koch and Perreault 2019). This may imply that through the position and instruments of national power, it can be a bearer of regional influence. The fact is that most states cannot be bearers of regional or strategic importance, but some states, in relation to their environment and geographical position, can be an important strategic pivot. The Republic of Serbia can be just such a state, which will be explained in more detail below.

Serbia plays an important role in the geopolitical structure of the Balkans and Southeast Europe, as can be seen from the statements of a large number of geopoliticians. Geopolitical theorists in their works have always perceived the Balkan Peninsula as an important geopolitical hub. Halford John Mackinder called the Balkans one of the

“bridges” connecting the Heartland with the peripheral parts of Europe (Mackinder 1904). Nicholas John Spykman identified the Balkans as a critical region of the Rimland, where Serbia plays a role in controlling traffic flows between the East and the West (Spykman 1944, 55–57). Among others, Zbigniew Brzezinski emphasizes the importance of the Balkans as a geopolitical turning point in Eurasia, especially mentioning Serbia as the center of conflicts and stability in the region (Brzezinski 2001, 124–125). Its geographical position, historical influences, and economic and political ties with the East and the West make it a key player in this region. Its geographical position positions Serbia at the crossroads of the main transport corridors between Europe and Asia. The Pan-European Corridor “X,” the Danube River, a major air hub, passes through Serbia, making it a strategic point for transport and communication in the region. The unique geography of the Balkan Peninsula positions Serbia as a point at the center of communications in this region. On the other hand, its historical connection with great powers is something that gives it a special feature in international relations. Throughout history, Serbia has been under the influence of great powers, including the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, and Russia. Today, this connection is reflected in close relations with Russia and China, as well as in its aspirations for integration into the European Union. This connection with great powers makes it a specific bridge between East and West.

Political stability as a basic condition for the overall progress of the region is one of the most important features. Given that Serbia borders eight sovereign states, this significantly complicates but also inherently increases its influence in the region. The soft power with which it can influence less developed neighbors, as well as neighbors with a large Serbian minority, significantly contributes to its importance (Pavić, Beriša, i Mihajlović 2024). The policy of stability and cooperation it pursues is of central importance, because possible instability in Serbia also affects other countries in the region. Serbia has a relatively stable political position compared to some other Balkan countries, which makes it an important factor in regional politics. As the most influential country of the former Yugoslavia, especially in terms of population and economy, Serbia has a significant role in relations with its neighbors and issues such as migration, regional security, and trade.

The relationships with the European Union (EU), the People’s Republic of China, the USA, and the Russian Federation are central

to Serbia's international position. From a strategic perspective, Serbia applies the concept of *hedging* strategy (Kuik 2008, 159). This concept can be presented as a strategy of hedging and mitigating risks in international relations. In security studies, it refers to the approach used by states to reduce risks and increase flexibility in an uncertain foreign policy environment, especially when they have to balance between major powers (Goh 2008, 10). Serbia is a candidate for membership in the European Union, but at the same time maintains close relations with the Russian Federation, especially in the energy sector. Russia, for example, supplies Serbia with natural gas and uses its veto power in the UN Security Council to support Serbia's positions regarding the status of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija. This approach allows Serbia to maintain a certain flexibility and independence in decision-making, while geopolitical maneuvers between major powers can increase its strategic value in the regional and broader context.

On the other hand, economic cooperation and investments from the PRC position Serbia as a key partner of the PRC within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and in the 17+1 regional platform for cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Energy issues, including gas and electricity supply, also make Serbia a key point in regional strategies. Serbia is a country through which a very important branch of the South Stream gas pipeline passes, connecting Hungary, i.e., Central Europe, with gas from Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, as well as other energy corridors, which gives it a certain strength in negotiations with the EU and Russia, especially in the context of the energy crisis in Europe.

Serbia, as a geopolitical pivot in the Balkans, is also characterized by its geopolitical identity. Professor Stepić states that an important starting point for understanding geopolitical identity is the "identification of geopolitical self-awareness and continuity in time and space" (Stepić 2019, 8). Similarly, Professor Despotović states that geopolitical identity represents an objective identity-geographical property of a national or religious group, and is related to its specific spatial, cultural-civilizational, religious-confessional, and political-state form of existence (Despotović 2019, 301).

A major challenge for Serbia is the fact that it has no access to the sea, which it lost in 2006, with the collapse of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro. After that, Serbia became a territorially locked country,

or “landlocked country”. In this context, Professor Stepić concluded that the Serbian people and countries have access to the sea in their historical and geographical spread, but due to territorial contraction and de-Serbization, they are being pushed towards the central part of the Balkan Peninsula (Stepić 2019, 10–11). The aforementioned resulted in Serbia becoming part of a tellurocratic geopolitical identity. Despotović and Glišin further emphasized Serbia’s island position by the fact that it is almost completely surrounded by NATO members, which can contribute to isolation and make it difficult to realize its interests (Despotović and Glišin 2023, 139). It is known that other states, such as Austria and Switzerland, have a similar position to island states surrounded by NATO in Europe. However, it is certain that they do not have even a close number of challenges that Serbia faces in its long struggle for existence and statehood.

Serbia, with its *hedging* strategy in international relations, skillfully uses its role as a geopolitical pivot through a multi-vector policy that allows it to cooperate with various actors, while at the same time maintaining its independence. With the pragmatic use of the resources it possesses in geography, a long history of successful international relations, a recognizable geopolitical identity, and military superiority compared to most of its neighbors, Serbia could become an even more significant factor of stability in the region.

SERBIA – SERBS: SURVIVAL OF THE STATE AND NATION THROUGH THE CENTURIES

The almost millennial history of a nation, its existence and preservation to this day has undoubtedly been exposed to various challenges over the centuries that have shaped the state that we today call the Republic of Serbia. The Serbian nation, through its existence, has in some way become a hallmark of the central, tellurocratic part of the Balkan Peninsula and Southeast Europe. The dominant nation of the continental Balkans, with its culture, religion, language, history, and geography, has marked the space in which it is positioned and today, perhaps more than ever, testifies to the fact that nations that are not large can survive; that is, it has declared its geopolitical identity. The fact is that this space has always been geopolitically sensitive, which requires active monitoring and analysis of international trends, in order to act on the spot in a timely and systematic manner. According to

Despotović and Glišin, the geopolitical position of Serbia should be viewed in the broader Balkan environment, especially considering the position of the Serbian people throughout the Serbian lands (Despotović and Glišin 2023, 143). What is it that allows the Serbs to survive in a space where different civilizations, religions, and interests meet? What kind of strategy is used by a nation that does not officially recognize a grand strategy in documents, but manages to preserve its vital national interests?

Serbia, according to its quantitative indicators, belongs to the medium-sized states, which have managed to maintain their existence on the same territory for more than 800 years. Despotović and Glišin stated in their work that the main geopolitical features of the position of Serbia and the Serbian people are: contact, border, node, and fragmentation (Despotović and Glišin 2023, 140). In addition to the above, its longevity, which can be compared to the largest European nations, gives it the right to be an important regional factor and a recognized element of statehood and positive European traditions. However, despite this, the specific environment and foreign policy with which we secure our international position pose great challenges to the state administration. How and in what way to achieve vital national interests and balance the influence of great powers is one of the issues that is directly related to the survival of the Serbian people, but also to the strategy that they will resort to on that path. Examples of strategic pragmatism and delay in negotiations as a factor in achieving national interests that the Serbs have applied can be observed in almost every era of the existence of statehood. During negotiations with the Austrian monarchy in 1810, Prince Metternich (*Klemens von Metternich*) advised the Serbs to delay negotiations with the Turks as much as possible (Jakšić 1937, 99). Also, in the same period, in order to achieve their interests, the Serbs simultaneously sought help from Austria, France, and Russia. They conducted negotiations in principle by sending deputies secretly and did not inform the other parties in the negotiations, all with the aim of securing support in the fight for liberation from Turkey (Jakšić 1937, 99–100). The same principles were used during the Cold War, when Yugoslavia skillfully balanced between East and West, i.e., the USA and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and was the main initiator of the idea of the “Non-Aligned Movement” (Jakovina 2021). Serbia still bases its foreign policy on four pillars today. This concept was first applied in August 2009 when Serbian President Boris Tadić,

after a visit to Beijing, stated that Serbia had “four pillars” of foreign policy, namely the People’s Republic of China, the EU, Russia and the USA, and that this would be its basic foreign policy doctrine in the long term (Gajić i Janković 2012, 176–177).

The Serbian ethnic community has gone through a series of stages of development in the course of consolidating the people, nation, and state in the modern sense. In this process of development, a territory, a common life, a historical past, an anthropological appearance, a language, a script, literature in the vernacular, religion, a specific lifestyle, an awareness of belonging to the Serbian people, and, on the basis of all this, a national state were created. This entire complex process gave birth to a people and a nation, as well as a modern state with all the features of the modern era (Mitrović *et al.* 1979, 111). The previous analysis of historical facts in the context of searching for sources that define a long-term strategy can also be viewed through the terms of grand and state strategy (Hoffman 2014, 472). Both terms, grand strategy and state strategy, can be useful, but their application depends on the context and the emphasis you want to place on different aspects of state planning and action. Grand strategy emphasizes the integration of all national efforts to act on a global or regional level, while state strategy has a more internally oriented approach. The previously analyzed contexts and interests imply that Serbia, as a medium-sized state, has more arguments to have a state strategy.

The survival of the Serbian nation is not only a national story but a universal message about the strength of identity, spirit, and unity in facing challenges. Serbia has proven throughout history that even small nations can leave a big mark, provided that they preserve their roots while looking to the future.

DEFINING SERBIA’S NATIONAL INTEREST IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The analysis of the national interests of a nation is possible through several factors; however, what is most important and what should be at the core of a grand strategy is their constancy. The fact is that every nation has its own national interests that are specific and, as a rule, adapted to its capabilities. Every state has general and special national interests. General or universal goals are the same for every

state in the international system; however, the means to achieve them are different.

The Serbian national interest, as defined by Prvulović, represents, by consensus or majority acceptance, a set of views on the goals of the development of Serbia and the Serbian people in the near and distant future, on the means by which these goals would be achieved and on the benefits that each individual and Serbian society as a whole would have (Prvulović 2020, 349). The topic of defining Serbian national interests is very sensitive, firstly because Serbia has always been a multinational country, and secondly because a large number of Serbs live outside Serbia. The national interests of Serbia, viewed in the context of contemporary politics, are a complex and sensitive issue that requires a high degree of consensus among key political actors. Although the will of the people is often invoked, in practice, national interests are most often formulated by holders of political office and the institutions that represent them.

Considering the national interests of the Serbian people, including those living outside the territory of the home state is not illegitimate, but rather a common practice in international relations. In this context, national interests are often formulated by political and institutional actors in the home state, and are then reflected in communities in the diaspora. Such a practice is also noticeable in the case of the Serbian people. In accordance with the above, we could define Serbian national interests in the 21st century according to the following: *Serbian national interests in the broadest context include physical security, territorial integrity, and political sovereignty. Economic interests include stable development, energy security, and access to markets. Identity interests relate to the preservation of cultural and spiritual identity, as well as the protection of the rights of members of the Serbian people outside the borders of the Republic of Serbia.* Interests categorized in this way represent the foundation on which a specific state policy and strategy can be articulated.

National interests in the context of this research can be divided into two categories, namely general and special national interests that occasionally appear on the strategic agenda. General national interests are usually linked to the most important national goals and are of crucial importance for the survival of the nation; that is, they should be the subject of consideration in a grand strategy. On the other hand, special national interests arise as a need and response of the state to

monitor global and regional trends. For the purposes of this research, the analysis of national interests was carried out according to the eras that had a decisive influence on the formation of statehood, as well as on different approaches to strategic thinking.

The historical consequences of the transition of Serbian statehood to the modern state in the 21st century shaped Serbian national interests in different ways. However, these events in the creation of national interests in the 21st century have only symbolic power. The definition of Serbian national interests in this paper is based on realist theory, which places more emphasis on the material factors of strategy creation. The strategic pragmatism discussed in this paper is also adapted to the interests defined in this way.

SERBIA'S STRATEGIC PRAGMATIVITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Serbia's strategic thinking in the 21st century has been shaped equally by the influences of the international community, but also by the internal intertwining of a multinational state and pluralistic political thinking. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ilica Dačić stated in 2023 that "There are two strategic goals: one is vital national state interests, in terms of territorial integrity, and the second issue is the future of Serbia, i.e. avoiding harmful consequences for the economic development of Serbia in the event of restrictive measures" (Đorđević 2023). This statement clearly declares the strategic foundation in the realization of national interests and strategic pragmatism as a principle that is realized through the concept of *hedging*. This is precisely the basis of the hypothesis and goals that need to be proven in this paper.

During the post-Yugoslav period, Serbia went through profound political, economic, and social transformations, which shaped its strategic thinking and approach to formulating national interests. This period is marked by conflicts, the transition from socialism to a market economy, separatist ambitions in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, European integration, and geopolitical challenges. Territories inhabited by ethnic Serbs, especially in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, became the scene of civil wars. The wars of the 1990s were directly related to the desire to preserve the Serbian people in the newly formed states of the former Yugoslavia. Serbia tried to protect Serbs in the

Republic of Srpska and the Republic of Serbian Krajina, which is often interpreted as an attempt to create a “Greater Serbia.” In this way, it also tried to protect its national interests. Due to the inability to defend Serbian national uprisings in Croatia, a large part of the Serbs were forced to leave the area.

On the other hand, Serbia managed to achieve some of its interests through the creation of the Republic of Srpska by signing the Dayton Agreement in 1995, which became a strategically important factor for Serbia in preserving Serbian identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not long after the end of the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, separatist aspirations opened a new focus. The decision to self-declare independence of the so-called Kosovo in 2008 forced Serbia to define a new approach. The policy of a “frozen conflict” and the continuous diplomatic struggle to withdraw recognition of “Kosovo” dominate Serbian foreign policy to this day (Stošić and Živojinović 2022, 42).

The above-mentioned examples of the complex political legacy of the post-Yugoslav period until the beginning of the 21st century also reflect the complexity of achieving national interests today. In this period, two documents are of particular importance for the national interests of Serbia, namely United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 from 1999 (UNSC, S/RES/1244) and the aforementioned Dayton Agreement from 1995 (UNSC, S/1995/999). Both of these documents are the international basis for the territorial integrity of Serbia, as well as the legal foundation of the Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e., the Republic of Srpska. These documents also provide a legal basis and legality for the national interests of the Serbian people. They are a striking example of a clear perception of national interests, but also of strategic pragmatism. Strategic thinking in that period recognized the great pressure of the international community and the potential loss of territory and displacement of Serbs from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as was the case in the Republic of Croatia. This led to the initiation of negotiations with the international community and the achievement of the aforementioned agreement.

Modern Serbia, as an independent state, was established in 2006 after the independence of Montenegro. After centuries of different state systems, the Serbian people gained an independent state. However, a large number of Serbs still remained in other countries. The modern national interests listed in the current National Security Strategy are defined as follows: preserving sovereignty, independence

and territorial integrity; preserving internal stability and security; preserving the existence and protection of the Serbian people wherever they live, as well as national minorities and their cultural, religious and historical identity; preserving peace and stability in the region and the world; European integration and membership in the European Union; economic development and overall prosperity and preservation of the environment and resources of the Republic of Serbia (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 3). The previously defined national interests comprehensively formulate a broad agenda; perceive the permanence, continuity and foundation of Serbian strategic thought.

A special contribution to strategic pragmatism and a clear definition of the international position is made by the Resolution on the Protection of the Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia, which proclaimed military neutrality in 2007. With this Resolution, Serbia legalizes its neutral position in relation to military alliances (Resolution of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 6). However, this approach is also an example of the application of the *hedging* concept within the framework of strategic pragmatism, as it leaves the possibility of cooperation with all international actors, and provides sufficient space for the realization of national interests.

In order to realize its national interests, Serbia has continued the aforementioned “four pillars” policy. A multi-vector foreign policy course would, in principle, produce positive effects on Serbia’s geopolitical position if consistently implemented. This approach is also an example of the application of the *hedging* concept within the framework of strategic pragmatism. However, due to the deeply opposing positions of Euro-Atlanticism and Neo-Eurasianism, such an approach is becoming increasingly complex and ultimately does not produce desired results. This, in some way, confirms the character of geopolitical hubris and the current features of Serbia in the international context. Geopolitical hubris is particularly manifested in periods when Serbia makes a greater deviation towards one of the pillars of foreign policy. This has been particularly pronounced in the last decade. Although one of the four pillars, the European Union is declaratively stated within the framework of Serbia’s national interests, and every act of rapprochement with the East, i.e., the Russian Federation, is

viewed with disapproval by the West. The West also exerts intense pressure on Serbia to make a decision and deviate from Russia, through harmonization with the foreign policy of the European Union (Glišin 2024, 295–299). On the other hand, such a move would directly prevent the realization of the national interest in preserving Kosovo and Metohija as part of Serbia.

A review of the formulation and possibility of realizing the national interests of small states such as Serbia is also given by the academician of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Časlav Ocić. In his text *Global context and geo-economic foundations of national integration – The Serbian question at the “end of history”*, he warns of serious manipulations by world power centers in relation to the interests of small states (Ocić 2020). It implies that the world’s power centers ignore everything related to the nation and instead state that the time of universalization, or the more widely accepted term of globalization, is coming, and Huntington’s clash of civilizations is denied. Prvulović emphasizes that the international community opposes putting the topic of resolving the Serbian issue on the agenda, which is finding a solution that would finally resolve this issue (Prvulović 2020, 110–111).

The previously mentioned examples of foreign policy engagement of the state administration, as well as the agreements reached and resolutions adopted, represent the fact that the Serbian people have a grand strategy that is not defined in documents, but is implemented in accordance with the circumstances and opportunities in the international environment. Serbia’s contemporary strategy is hybrid, combining national interests such as preserving sovereignty and territorial integrity with the need for integration into global trends. The focus is on geopolitical neutrality and the promotion of national interests through pragmatic policies. Strategic documents and policies of recent decades indicate that Serbia is aware of its historical and geographical position, but also of global challenges that are increasingly reflected in the Balkans. The factor of contradiction in foreign policy based on a neutral position in relation to directly opposing geopolitical positions, primarily of the USA, the European Union, and, on the other hand, the Russian Federation, is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain every day. The assumption is that this will directly affect the redefinition of national interests and the need for global positioning on one of the two opposing sides.

CONCLUSION

The research conducted in this paper confirms the initial hypothesis that strategic pragmatism is a significant factor in the articulation and realization of Serbia's national interests in the 21st century. Instead of a firm ideological orientation or fixed geopolitical alliances, Serbia has adopted a flexible and adaptive approach to international relations in the post-Yugoslav period, which is in the 21st century, guided by the priority of preserving state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national identity.

The historical perspective shows that Serbian statehood, despite numerous geopolitical challenges, has deep roots in political culture, decision-making based on *realpolitik* and the skill of hedging and mitigating risks in international relations in relation to great powers. The modern foreign policy doctrine of multi-vector action and the "four-pillar" strategy, with which Serbia demonstrates continuity in its efforts to formulate a strategy in accordance with real capacities and international circumstances. Although there is no formally articulated grand strategy in the institutional sense, what this paper shows is that the elements of the grand strategy are recognizable in foreign policy practice, institutional priorities, and historical experience.

The geopolitical position of Serbia as a nodal point in the Balkans, landlocked, surrounded by NATO members, and exposed to pressure from many sides, has conditioned a specific security and foreign policy approach. Strategic pragmatism, in this sense, is shown as an instrument of survival, and a rational method of improving Serbia's position on the regional and global stage. By combining the principles of *hedging* in international relations and relying on historically established ties, Serbia seeks to avoid sharp confrontation and preserve maximum room for maneuver in situations of deep divisions among the great powers.

The research also showed that Serbia's national interests, despite partial political fragmentation within the state and a complex ethnic and regional context, remain relatively stable and consistent over time. There is a broad degree of institutional and social consensus around the preservation of territorial integrity, the protection of the Serbian people abroad, stability in the region, and economic development. In this context, strategic pragmatism is not a short-term policy, but the basis of a long-term state approach, based on respect for internal capacities and external constraints. Although Serbia is subject to increasing pressure to define

itself more clearly geopolitically, especially in the context of relations with the EU and Russia, this paper points to the importance of preserving strategic independence. Despite the pressures, Serbia manages to use its specific position as a potential factor of stability in the region and as a bridge between East and West. In this sense, the current foreign policy and national strategy reflect a mature awareness of the geopolitical reality and historical constants that have shaped Serbian statehood.

Perhaps Sir James Beethom Whitehead, who was the British ambassador to Serbia, gave the best advice for the realization of the national interests and state strategy of the Serbs back in 1910. He always advised that the key to Serbia's security was its self-restraint in the future. While Dr. Živojin Perić, building on Whitehead, advised us to follow England's example and stop pursuing sentimental politics and start pursuing realpolitik, that is, the politics of interests (Đorgović 2022, 370).

Finally, Serbia, as a small state, shows that it is possible to have a grand strategy, not in terms of dominance or expansion, but in terms of sustainability, adaptability, and consistent preservation of vital national interests. Serbia's grand strategy, although informal, exists in practice; it is deeply rooted in collective historical experience, in institutional efforts, and in pragmatic, but value-based politics. The confirmed hypothesis of the work indicates that this model, although specific, can serve as an example for other small states that strive to preserve their sovereignty in a global system of unequal power.

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Александар Павић*

Војна Академија, Универзитет одбране у Београду

Хатица Бериша**

*Школа националне одбране „Војвода Радомир Путник”,
Универзитет одбране у Београду*

СТРАТЕГИЈСКА ПРАГМАТИЧНОСТ КАО ФАКТОР ОСТВАРЕЊА НАЦИОНАЛНИХ ИНТЕРЕСА СРБИЈЕ

Резиме

Овај рад се бави анализом концепта стратегијске прагматичности као кључног елемента у остваривању националних интереса Србије. Аутори полазе од претпоставке да Србија, иако не поседује формално дефинисану велику стратегију, у пракси спроводи свеобухватан, адаптиван и дугорочан приступ који је у складу са основним постулатима савремене велике стратегије. Централна теза рада је да стратегијска прагматичност није привремено решење, већ одустојан, рационалан и дугорочно одржив приступ који је у складу са геополитичком реалношћу Србије као мале државе на раскршћу глобалних интереса. Методолошки, рад комбинује геополитички и историјски приступ, ослањајући се на анализу кључних теоријских извора и примере из историје српске државности. Кроз анализу дефиниција велике стратегије различитих аутора (Лидел Харт, Едвард Ерл, Бери Посен, Џон Гадис и др.), аутори показују да и мала држава, попут Србије, може имати сопствени стратешки концепт, уколико тај концепт омогућава очување суверенитета, стабилности и развоја. Србија се приказује као геополитички пивот Балкана, који користи свој положај, историјско искуство и стратешку културу у функцији избегавања неповољних дилема и маневрисања између супротстављених глобалних центара

* Имејл адреса: aleksandar.pavic@mod.gov.rs; ORCID: 0009-0005-6737-0094

** Имејл адреса: hatidza.berisa@mod.gov.rs; ORCID: 0000-0002-9432-5273

моћи. Кроз стратегију „четири стуба” (ЕУ, САД, Русија, Кина) и примену концепта *hedging*, Србија настоји да сачува геополитичку неутралност, задржи простор за дипломатско деловање и очува виталне интересе као што су статус Косова и Метохије, однос према Србима ван матице, регионална стабилност и економски развој. Историјска перспектива анализира српску државност као континуитет стратегијске културе, у којој су и у прошлости примењиване технике одуговлачења, вишеструке дипломатије и реалполитике, од Првог српског устанка, преко несврстане политике Југославије, до савремене мултивекторске оријентације. У раду се такође указује на значај српске политичке стабилности, геополитичке „чворности”, улоге дијаспоре и историјске свести о територији као идентитетском елементу. У посебном делу анализирани су савремени национални интереси Србије, како у формално-правним документима (нпр. Стратегија националне безбедности, Резолуција о војној неутралности), тако и у реалној политици. Иако постоји висок степен консензуса око неких питања (суверенитет, интегритет, економски развој), Србија је изложена све већим притисцима да се геополитички определи, што доводи у питање одрживост тренутне стратегијске позиције. Рад закључује да Србија има „велику стратегију без документа”, дубоко укоревану у политичкој култури и институционалном деловању. Та стратегија је дефинисана прагматизмом, флексибилношћу и оријентацијом ка интересима, што је чини примером мале државе која успешно балансира у свету неједнаке моћи.

Кључне речи: стратегијска прагматичност, велика стратегија, Србија, национални интереси, геополитика, реалполитика, *hedging*

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