

Threading the needle: Serbian Armed Forces modernisation

[Content preview – Subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** for full article]

The Serbian Armed Forces have embarked upon their first major modernisation and renewal programme since 1999 when the Balkan wars ended. *Jim Dorschner* reports

Serbia's military modernisation effort requires the country to delicately balance the implications of receiving help from Russia while maintaining mutually beneficial, strong relations with NATO and the European Union (EU). By introducing capability improvements including new combat aircraft, helicopters, and air defence systems, Serbia is charting a course fraught with risk in a volatile region that has lingering security concerns that increasingly reflect broader rising tensions between the Atlantic alliance and Russia.



Serbian soldiers during the opening ceremony of the joint multinational exercise 'Noble Partner' near Tbilisi on 30 July 2017. The exercise demonstrated US support for Georgia after it squared off against Russia and provided Serbia with an opportunity to demonstrate its desire to cultivate closer ties with NATO and EU nations. (Vano Shlamov/AFP/Getty Images)

1721681

When the Balkan wars finally staggered to an end with the withdrawal of Serb forces from the breakaway province of Kosovo in late 1999, all that remained of the former Yugoslavia was a much-diminished union of Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006 Montenegro also formed a separate state, leaving an isolated and battered Serbia to carry on minus Kosovo, which was, and still is, occupied by the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR). Furthermore, the Serbian capital, Belgrade, and other areas around the country were badly damaged by the air campaign that preceded NATO's entry into Kosovo.

During the next decade the cash-strapped Serbian Armed Forces (SAF), an amalgamation of the once-mighty Yugoslav National Army (Jugoslovenska narodna armija: JNA) and the Serbian army of 1830-1918, quickly shed personnel, force structure, and infrastructure. The service was forced to rely on increasingly obsolete stocks of former JNA equipment, including aircraft, armoured vehicles, artillery, and air defence systems. Uniformed manpower dropped from more than 100,000 in 2000 to fewer than 30,000 personnel by 2007.

The SAF today

The Serbian Land Forces (Kopnena Vojska: KV) stabilised to about four lightly equipped combined arms brigades during 2006–07 by consolidating existing under-strength units and employing the most modern equipment available. The brigades nominally control seven infantry battalions, three tank battalions, and eight mechanised battalions, along with organic artillery, engineer, and reconnaissance assets, as well as logistics support. Equipment includes M-84 main battle tanks (MBTs), M-80 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), 122 mm 2S1 self-propelled howitzers, 40 mm L/70 Bofors anti-aircraft artillery, BTR-50 armoured personnel carriers (APCs), and BRDM-2 reconnaissance vehicles.

Although impressive at first glance, the reality is that most KV units are seriously undermanned, with generally low serviceability of major weapon systems and equipment. In terms of training and deployment, since 2006 the combined arms brigades have focused almost exclusively on securing the southern Ground Safety Zone (GSZ) that separates Serbia from Kosovo and KFOR, and the adjacent border with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).

In general support of the four combined arms brigades is a mixed artillery brigade with two howitzer battalions, a gun artillery battalion, a multiple rocket launcher (MRL) battalion, and a logistics battalion. Equipment includes 262 mm M87 Orkan and 128 mm M77 Oganj MRLs and 155 mm M114 howitzers. The Guard is another brigade-sized unit based in Belgrade and subordinate to the General Staff, which includes a ceremonial battalion, two military police battalions – including the Kobre (Cobra) anti-terrorism battalion – and a logistics battalion.

Serbia's Special Brigade includes an anti-terrorism battalion, a reconnaissance-commando battalion, a parachute infantry battalion, and a logistics company. The Special Brigade, formed in 1995 following a merger between the former 63rd Airborne Brigade and the 72nd Special Brigade, is also directly subordinate to the General Staff. Emblematic of the situation in which the SAF now finds itself, the brigade has exercised with its NATO counterparts in recent years, including US forces as well as with Russian special forces. Discussions have been held with Spain and other NATO countries regarding development of a special forces training programme.

Meanwhile, the shrunken Serbian Air Force and Air Defence (AFAD) force has just a handful of surviving MiG-29 and MiG-21 fighters that are barely capable of policing Serbian airspace. The service has all but withdrawn its other air combat assets. Similarly, its air defence systems, which were badly mauled during the 1999 NATO air campaign, continue to rely on surviving, outdated Soviet-era surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems, primarily the Kub-M (SA-6) and Neva-M (SA-3) systems and associated radars, which have poor serviceability.

Air transport and tactical helicopter numbers have dwindled to a single An-26 twin turboprop, fewer than 10 Mi-17 transport helicopters, and a few dozen locally produced versions of the SA 341 Gazelle utility helicopter. When Montenegro withdrew from the union in 2006, it took what was left of the Yugoslav Navy with it, including bases on the Adriatic coast.

Following the break-up with Montenegro the SAF became a joint force, with a new Joint Forces Command assuming greater operational responsibilities. A Joint Training Command was also established in 2007 by merging KV and AFAD activities and this controls training centres and firing ranges.

Challenges

From 2008 the global recession hit Serbia and the rest of the Balkans particularly hard. As the already-weak economy further eroded and the national treasury struggled to meet basic spending needs, SAF readiness and equipment serviceability continued to diminish, along with morale. However, despite the circumstances, professionalism in the SAF remained relatively high despite frozen salaries, pension concerns, and a general decline in the quality of life for service members and their families.

Veterans in the officer corps are retiring and making way for a younger generation with a slightly broader world view. This includes the benefits of direct professional interactions with NATO officers along the GSZ with Kosovo during bilateral training opportunities and attendance at institutions such as the US Army War College. That said, the SAF leadership is decidedly conservative and devoted to historic ideals of the Serb state, including a sense of kinship with Orthodox Christian Russia, Greece, and Romania. The SAF's senior officers were all commissioned into the JNA and served through the wars of the 1990s, including Chief of the General Staff (CGS) General Ljubisa Dikovic, who was appointed in 2013.

In 2015 Gen Dikovic was accused of complicity in possible war crimes committed in Kosovo in 1999 when he was a brigade commander. In response he has been retained beyond the normal term as CGS by successive governments to shield him from prosecution. On the other hand, in March 2016 Serbian authorities arrested eight former servicemen suspected of participating in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre during the Bosnia War, which marked the first Serbian detentions of direct participants in the killing of 8,000 Muslims in the massacre.

[Continued in full version...]

(1037 of 3816 words)

For the full version and more content:

Jane's Defence Industry and Markets Intelligence Centre

This analysis is taken from [Jane's Defence Industry & Markets Intelligence Centre](#), which provides world-leading analysis of commercial, industrial and technological defence developments, budget and programme forecasts, and insight into new and emerging defence markets around the world.

*Jane's defence industry and markets news and analysis is also available within **Jane's Defence Weekly**. To learn more and to subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** online, offline or print visit <http://magazines.ihs.com/>*

For advertising solutions visit [Jane's Advertising](#)