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Serbia – United States: Strengthening bilateral relations

The inauguration of the US-Serbia Strategic Dialogue in July 2026 represents an important step in the development of bilateral relations since Aleksander Vučić came to power. The establishment of a permanent consultation mechanism indicates the readiness of both sides to strengthen cooperation in the fields of energy, security, new technologies, and science. At the same time, the nature of the agreements signed and Belgrade's continued balancing policy do not warrant speaking of a strategic reorientation of Serbian foreign policy. Rather, the Dialogue should be viewed as part of the broader geopolitical competition among the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia for influence in the Western Balkans, in which Serbia remains one of the key actors.

Keywords: China, strategic partnership, Russia, Serbia, EU, USA

Relations between Serbia and the United States are among the most complex bilateral relationships in Southeastern Europe. Their contemporary character is shaped by the coexistence of growing economic and security cooperation with fundamental disagreements concerning the status of Kosovo and policies toward the Russian Federation and China. Although diplomatic relations between the two countries date back to the 19th century and were formally established in 1881, their current shape remains primarily a consequence of events in the 1990s.

The breakup of Yugoslavia, the international sanctions imposed on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), of which Serbia was a part, and NATO's intervention in the FRY in 1999 led to a profound crisis in bilateral relations. The bombing of Serbia during the intervention remains one of the most important elements of collective Serbian memory and continues to shape, to a significant extent, the skeptical attitude of a considerable part of Serbian society toward the United States. Only after the removal from power of FRY President Slobodan Milošević in 2000 did a gradual process of rebuilding political, economic, and military cooperation begin, despite the continuing disputes over the recognition of Kosovo's independence.

During the period when Aleksander Vučić served as prime minister and subsequently as president, Serbia has consistently pursued a policy aimed at maintaining good relations with both the European Union and the United States, as well as Russia and China. In this context, Washington is viewed primarily as an important economic and security partner, whose significance has increased as relations between the West and Russia have deteriorated since 2022.

A marked improvement in Serbia-US relations took place during the first term of President Donald Trump¹. The culmination of this process was the signing by Serbia and Kosovo of the Washington Agreement in September 2020, whose main objective was to develop economic cooperation and implement infrastructure projects ([“IEŚ Commentaries”, No. 248](#)). Although the agreement did not lead to a breakthrough in the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, it created a new platform for cooperation with the United States focused on investment, trade, and regional development.

¹ It is worth adding that for months President A. Vučić has repeatedly invited President D. Trump to visit Serbia, emphasising that he is the most popular American president in this Balkan country.



In recent years (2025-2026), political dialogue between Belgrade and Washington has intensified. During his stay in New York in September 2025, where he participated in the annual session of the UN General Assembly, Serbian President A. Vučić held talks with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The main topics included economic cooperation, the resolution of the issue of US tariffs², new investments, energy, and new technologies. At the same time, the Serbian president emphasised the importance of strategic dialogue with the United States, thanking the US administration for its engagement in maintaining the security of the Serbian community in Kosovo and its support the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Serbian President's talks with US Congressman Michael Turner (Republican Party) and Donald Norcross (Democratic Party) in November 2025 had a similar character. Among the issues discussed were Serbia's energy, security, particularly the future of the Serbian oil company *Naftna Industrija Srbije* (NIS), Serbia's European integration, and the situation in the Balkans. A. Vučić's statements indicated a readiness to further deepen cooperation with the United States and maintain a regular political dialogue on matters of strategic importance.

At the same time, in February 2026, Serbia participated in the Transatlantic Gas Security Summit³, organised by the U.S. National Energy Dominance Council. The summit aimed to strengthen the resilience of the European natural gas market and diversify sources and routes for supplying this commodity to Central and Southeastern Europe. Serbian Minister of Mining and Energy Dubravka Đedović Handanović signed a joint statement on gas supply security. The document provides for cooperation to ensure stable and affordable natural gas supplies, make use of existing infrastructure, and, where necessary, to construct new gas interconnections. As the minister emphasised, Serbia's objective is to increase energy security by diversifying energy sources and supply routes rather than replacing dependence on one supplier (implicitly, Russia) with dependence on another (the United States).

Another signal of closer relations came in March 2026, when the Serbian president announced that Belgrade would "invest a great deal" in improving relations with the United States. In the same statement, A. Vučić emphasised his readiness to accelerate reforms related to European integration, while noting that the main obstacles remained the issue of Kosovo and relations with Russia. It is characteristic that improving relations with Washington was presented as part of a broader strategy to strengthen Serbia's international position rather than as a departure from its existing policy of balancing between the major international actors.

Inauguration of the US-Serbia Strategic Dialogue. The inauguration of the US-Serbia Strategic Dialogue, which took place in Washington on 17 July 2026, under the leadership of US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Serbian Foreign Minister Marko Đurić, represents one of the most important moments in the development of bilateral relations since A. Vučić came to power. Minister M. Đurić described the Strategic Dialogue as a "historic milestone", emphasising that it restores to Serbian-American relations a level of importance commensurate with relations between countries that had been allies during both world wars.

² In January 2025, the US Treasury Department announced sanctions against NIS, demanding the complete withdrawal of Russian owners from the company's shareholder structure. A year later, the Hungarian oil and gas company MOL signed a binding framework agreement with *Gazprom Neft* concerning the principal terms of a transaction for the acquisition of a combined 56.15% stake in NIS held by Russian entities. Currently, *Gazprom Neft* holds 44.85% of NIS shares, the Serbian government holds 29.87%, while the St. Petersburg-registered company *Intelligence*, indirectly controlled by *Gazprom*, holds 11.3%. The remaining shares are held by a number of minority shareholders. The United States has issued a temporary license (until August 28) allowing NIS to continue its key operations despite the sanctions related to Russian ownership control; see more: V. Bajić, *U.S. renews NIS sanctions waiver, extends ownership talks*, <https://seenews.com/news/u-s-renews-nis-sanctions-waiver-extends-ownership-talks-1299106> [08.08.2026]. This issue poses a serious problem for Serbia, as NIS remains a key component of the Serbian energy system—the refinery in Pančevo is of enormous importance for the country's fuel supply; see more: "IEŚ Commentaries," Nos. 1495, 1451, 1401, and 915.

³ In addition to US representatives, the summit was attended by ministers from 12 European countries (Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, Croatia, Lithuania, Moldova, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as representatives of the European Commission.



Energy cooperation is a particularly important element of the new partnership. The signing of a memorandum concerning energy infrastructure and regional energy security, as well as the preliminary decision to continue preparations for Đerdap III (Iron Gate III) pumped-storage hydropower plant project⁴, demonstrate the growing interest of the United States in increasing its presence in strategic sectors of the Serbian economy. The selection of a project whose concept was developed as early as the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY)⁵ has not only an economic but also a geopolitical dimension. The implementation of this investment forms part of broader efforts to diversify energy sources and reduce the dependence of Southeastern European countries on Russian energy resources.

A similar significance can be attributed to the decision by the *Export-Import Bank of the United States* to provide *Telekom Srbija Group* with a \$50 million loan guarantee for the development of 5G infrastructure using trusted technology suppliers. The decision forms part of the US strategy of strengthening the digital security of partner countries and limiting the presence of Chinese telecommunications infrastructure providers.

Military cooperation remains the second pillar of the developing partnership. Both sides announced an intensification of defence contacts, emphasising the importance of the twenty-year cooperation between the Ohio National Guard and the Serbian Armed Forces under the *State Partnership Program*. An important element of this process is also Serbia's request to purchase US weapons, which indicates a gradual increase in the interoperability of the Serbian armed forces with the armed forces of NATO member states. The development of defence cooperation is part of a pragmatic strategy of diversifying security partners and modernising military capabilities. US financial support for humanitarian demining programs, which have been one of the most enduring areas of cooperation between the two countries for many years, should also be viewed in this context.

The development of cooperation in the fields of new technologies and scientific research is no less important. Serbia's decision to join the *Artemis Accords*⁶ indicates growing interest among the authorities in Belgrade in participating in Western technological initiatives and strengthening cooperation with the US innovation sector.

The memorandum concerning the co-financing of the Fulbright Program serves a similar purpose. Under the arrangement, Serbia has committed to allocating \$300,000 annually to the development of academic exchanges. At the same time, the Serbian side declared that it would consider joining the initiative concerning the restitution of Nazi-confiscated art, *Best Practices for the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art*. In addition, the opening of new Serbian consulates in Miami and San Francisco was announced. The United States, in turn, confirmed its participation in Expo 2027, which will be held in Belgrade.

Conclusions. An analysis of the outcomes of the first Strategic Dialogue indicates that both sides seek to redefine their mutual relations by shifting the focus from contentious issues toward the development of cooperation in specific sectors. From the perspective of the United States, this means an attempt to strengthen its position in Serbia—a country of strategic importance in the Western Balkans—and limit Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Cooperation in the field of security, including energy security, may be particularly important in this context. Current circumstances create an opportunity to gradually reduce Serbia's dependence on Russia and diminish Russian influence in this area.

From the perspective of the Serbian authorities, however, the development of the partnership with Washington is part of the foreign policy pursued by President A. Vučić, whose objective remains to simultaneously maintain good relations with the West, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China. The Strategic Dialogue

⁴ Đerdap III is a large-scale pumped-storage hydropower plant planned for many years in Serbia on the Danube. It is intended to become a key component of the region's energy stabilisation system, with a projected clean-energy capacity of up to 2,400 MW. Its construction is scheduled for completion by 2038.

⁵ Đerdap I was completed in 1972, while Đerdap II was completed in 1985.

⁶ These are multilateral, non-binding agreements concluded by the United States with other countries. They concern principles governing the exploration of the Moon, Mars, and other celestial bodies.



therefore does not signify a fundamental reorientation of Serbian foreign policy⁷, but rather demonstrates Belgrade's growing pragmatism and the advancing institutionalisation of cooperation with the United States in areas considered mutually beneficial by both sides.

At the same time, Serbia faces an increasingly difficult task in maintaining its existing policy of balancing relations with the major powers. Deepening cooperation with the United States may lead to tensions in relations with China, particularly in the fields of new technologies, telecommunications, and artificial intelligence. At the end of May, President A. Vučić paid an official visit to China lasting several days, during which potential infrastructure and technology investments were discussed and several dozen additional agreements and memoranda of cooperation were signed. The current Strategic Dialogue may therefore once again force Belgrade to make decisions in areas where the interests of the United States and China remain directly competitive.

At this stage, it is too early to assess unequivocally the long-term significance of the US–Serbia Strategic Dialogue. The establishment of a new consultation mechanism is undoubtedly an important political signal and demonstrates a clear strengthening of bilateral relations. However, it does not yet indicate a lasting change in Serbia's geopolitical orientation.

The nature of the arrangements adopted also calls for caution in assessing the results of the Strategic Dialogue. Most of them were formalised in the form of Memoranda of Understanding (*MoUs*) rather than legally binding international agreements. This means that their actual value will depend on the degree to which individual projects are implemented and on the continued political determination of both sides.

The development of energy cooperation may prove to be the most tangible outcome of the Dialogue. The memorandum signed on energy infrastructure and the decision to begin preparations for the Đerdap III hydropower project form part of the broader strategy pursued by the United States and Western countries aimed at gradually reducing Russian energy influence in the Balkans while simultaneously limiting China's growing economic presence⁸. From Washington's perspective, infrastructure projects are becoming an instrument of geopolitical influence, while for Belgrade they represent an opportunity to modernise infrastructure and increase energy security without having to abandon its existing balancing policy.

Finally, the strengthening of Serbia's relations with the United States and China, as well as with other key international partners, should be viewed not only as an element characteristic of Belgrade's foreign policy but also as an instrument for strengthening A. Vučić's position on the domestic political scene ahead of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. It can be assumed that, after completing his second and constitutionally final possible presidential term, A. Vučić will seek to return to the position of prime minister. This scenario may, however, prove difficult to achieve amid growing support for alternative political forces, including the student movement, whose representatives have organised mass protests since late 2024. In this situation, foreign policy may serve as an important tool for the Serbian president to strengthen his domestic legitimacy. Successes on the international stage—especially those that can be presented as evidence of the effectiveness of Serbian diplomacy and the personal standing of the head of state—may help build A. Vučić's image as a politician capable of safeguarding the country's interests amid growing geopolitical competition. Maintaining parallel relations with the United States, China, and Russia is particularly important in this regard.

⁷ Under current political conditions, the possibility of a fundamental change in Serbia's foreign-policy course by the authorities remains limited. This is primarily due to the approaching presidential and parliamentary elections, the mass social protests that have continued for many months, the growing mobilisation and importance of the student movement, and the gradual weakening of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President A. Vučić. As a result, the authorities must take into account the growing political costs of any potential adjustment to the existing foreign-policy strategy, which limits their ability to fundamentally reorient it.

⁸ In this context, it should be added that the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) issued a detention order for imports of copper and copper products from the Serbian mining company *Zijin Copper*, owned by the Chinese conglomerate, amid allegations that the goods had been produced using forced labour.