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## GEOPOLITICAL ORIGINS OF THE FIRST SOVIET-YUGOSLAV CRISIS

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### Summary

This paper examines the geopolitical contradictions between Soviet Union and Yugoslavia during 1946 and 1948. Their strategic orientations split significantly toward the Greek Civil War, the construction of Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation and Balkan Federation, the Yugoslav-Albanian relation and integration, and the final settlement of Trieste. These irreconcilable geostrategic contradictions and separate divergences of national interests finally led to the first crack within the Socialist Bloc.

**Key words:** First Soviet-Yugoslav Crisis, Balkan Federation, Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Greek Civil War, Bulgaria, Albania, Trieste.

### Introduction

Pushed by the common goal to defeat Nazi Fascist and promote international socialist revolution, Yugoslavia became a firm alliance and follower of the Soviet Union during the Second World War. During the diplomatic honeymoon period between two countries immediately after the defeat of Nazi, Yugoslav leaders claimed that Yugoslavia would forever implement the most amicable policies toward Soviet Union and “there is no force in the world can sabotage such a brotherly alliance.”<sup>[1]</sup> This honeymoon period ended up unpleasantly and conflicts of interests began to grow as two countries started to implement two complete different grand strategies. At the beginning of the Cold War, Soviets identified Eastern Europe as its strategic pivot area for it is the geopolitical buffer zone between Western bloc and Soviet bloc. It is also a springboard for Soviets to further expand their sphere of influence to the Balkan and Western European region. In addition, at

the Yalta Conference, Soviets and Americans had already delimited their future spheres of influence in Europe. Being busy in consolidating influence in Eastern Europe, Soviets didn't want to start a new competitions for influence with Americans in Balkan region.<sup>[2]</sup> Yugoslavs strategy on the other hand, focuses on establishing a Belgrade-centered Balkan Federation which would operate independently from Moscow.<sup>[3]</sup> This strategy also needs to incorporate all current socialist countries and to overthrow other non-socialist regimes in Balkan region. Although Soviets didn't want a direct competition for influences in Balkan with the Western camp, they expected a Soviet-dependent regime in Yugoslavia which would be loyal to Moscow. In spite of the fact that Soviets and Yugoslavs once had an intimate comradeship, the huge divergence in grand strategies and identifications of different interests quickly led to the complete split of Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

### **The Greek Civil War**

During the Second World War, the Greek communist guerrilla movements against the Nazi began to rise across the whole Greece. At its peak period, the Greek communist guerrilla forces had nearly 800,000 regular army personnels and liberated over 90 percent of the whole territory of Greece.<sup>[4]</sup> Previous to the Nazi invasion, Britain had maintained significant influences for over one hundred years after the Greek Independence War in 1821. Continuing to emphasize the development of maritime capability, Britain deemed Greece as important as Gibraltar as Greece is the strategic checkpoint for access to Adriatic Sea, Aegean Sea and Balkan region. Thus even before the final conclusion of the Second World War, British tried several times to woo Soviets in expectation of their compromise on influence over Greece given the fact that Soviet power was dramatically weakened during the Second World War.<sup>[5]</sup> From Soviet security perspective, the geostrategic importance of Greece is much less important than of Eastern Europe.

In May 1944, when British put forward a plan to divide each allied forces' combat areas in Southeastern Europe against Nazi, Soviet pleasantly accepted the British proposal. According to this agreement, British forces would be in charge of military campaigns in Greece and Yugoslavia while Soviet forces would be responsible for military campaigns in Bulgaria and Romania.<sup>[6]</sup> In October the same year, fearing that Soviet would not follow the previous May agreement, Churchill fled to Moscow and reached a new "Percentage Agreement" with Stalin which delimit their own spheres and degrees of influences in Southeastern Europe. This Percentage Agreement stipulated that Soviets would have 90 percent of influence in Romania, 75 percent in Bulgaria, and 50 percent in Yugoslavia and Hungary, while British would have 90 percent of influence in Greece and 50 percent in Yugoslavia and Hungary.<sup>[7]</sup> From these two agreements discussed above it is clear that Stalin had formally recognized Greece as British and Western influencing area.<sup>[8]</sup> For Stalin it is a Zero-Sum game that only compromise in Greece can in turn gain more influences in Eastern Europe. Even after the outbreak of Cold War, Stalin was unwilling to break the agreements established between the Soviet Union and other Western allied countries.

In March 1946, the Greek communist decided to organized armed revolution against the current Greek government backed by Britain. They created the Democratic Army of Greece based on communist guerrilla force during the Second World War in August 1946. The Democracy Army of Greece successfully survived the encircle by government force in the Autumn of 1946 and the spring offense in 1947. In Autumn of 1947 the Democratic Army of Greece had liberated the majority of the territory, and an provisional government led by General Markos Wafiadis were established.

For Yugoslavs, if the Greek communist revolution could overthrow the current government

backed by the West, then Western influence in the Balkan region would be significantly decreased. Moreover, to establish a regime which would have a common ideology in Greece would be very important for the future construction of the “Balkan Federation”. As early as in April 1944, Tito’s spokesman had explicitly expressed Yugoslavs vision to established “the Balkan Federation which would include Greece” or to form a permanent alliance with Greece.<sup>[9]</sup> Immediately after the start of Greek communist revolution in 1946, Yugoslavs decide to provide both material and military supports for the Democracy Army of Greece. In August 1947, Yugoslavia, along with Bulgaria and Albania, formed the Joint Balkan Chief of Staff to back the Greek communist revolution. It guaranteed to provide artillery, air and infantry force to defend the Greek communist force’s rear.<sup>[10]</sup> Apart from providing military and material supports for Greek revolution, Yugoslavs also agree to provide secure areas near the border for Greek communist force as safe areas.<sup>[11]</sup>

Yugoslavs enthusiastic intervention in the Greek Civil War dramatically disrupted Soviets existing strategies. Soviets were passive toward the communist revolution in Greece. Firstly, by signing the May agreement and Percentage agreement with Britain, Soviets secured their absolute control in Eastern Europe while recognizing the British dominating influence in Greece. Immediately after the Second World War, Soviets primary diplomatic goal was to maintain the alliance relations with other victorious countries. By cooperating with other Western allied countries, Soviets could keep and consolidate their existing political gains from Yalta system and Potsdam system. Hence, in principle, Soviet kept adhering those previously established treaties and agreements with other allied countries.<sup>[12]</sup> Secondly, Stalin didn’t want to challenge United States led Western bloc directly. In the Greek Civil War, British and American established the Joint Chief of Staff to counter the quickly-expanding Greek Communist Revolution. If Soviets directly intervene and back the Greek communist, then American would view Soviets action as an deliberate disruption to the previous established treaties and to the post-war international order.<sup>[13]</sup> Thus, Stalin directly pointed out that the Yugoslavs intervention in the Greek Civil War would very possibly lead to the escalation, confrontation or even another world war between Western bloc and Soviet bloc.<sup>[13]</sup> Moscow’s conservative attitude toward backing Greek communist was further demonstrated by Stalin’s claim that “if it is invaded by Americans, let then defend their independence by themselves...the Greek revolution must be constrained as soon as possible without any hesitance.”<sup>[14]</sup> When Yugoslav leader Edvard Kardelj talked about Greek civil war with Stalin, Stalin fiercely criticized that Yugoslavs interventions in Greek Civil War and their support for the Greek communist “put us [Yugoslavs and Soviets] in an political dilemma.”<sup>[15]</sup> Because “to increase the support for Greek revolution” is equal to “directly challenge Washington”, which would lead to international disputes.<sup>[16]</sup> In the post-war settlement of Balkan region, Stalin didn’t want to change the existing status quo based on previous agreements with the West. Tito, however, enthusiastically supported the communist revolution in Greece, which dramatically disrupted Moscow’s strategy and led to future clash between two countries grand strategies.

### **Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation and “Balkan Federation”**

The initiative of the integration project between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was proposed by Stalin in 1944. There are two geopolitical incentives for Soviets to push this project: firstly, as a vanquished country in the Second World War, Bulgaria would be controlled by four major victorious countries, three of which belong to Western bloc. But if Bulgaria and Yugoslavia form a federation, then Bulgaria would be free from western allied countries’ controls since Yugoslavia was one of the victorious powers. Secondly, by integrating Bulgaria and Yugoslavia together, Soviets could

significantly reduce the risk of a Bulgarian defection to the West. Finally, Stalin could contain Tito's expansion by increasing Yugoslavia's political bond with Eastern Europe.

In April 1944, Tito's spokesman publicly announced Yugoslavs future vision to construct a Balkan Federation consisted of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece.<sup>[17]</sup> And the first step to achieve this ambitious project is to form Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation.<sup>[18]</sup> As early as in 1944, Tito and Bulgarian communist leader Georgi Dimitrov had already started considering the possibility to integrate two countries together.<sup>[19]</sup> In September 1944, Tito and Georgi Dimitrov met twice at Moscow. During the meetings, two leaders achieved the consensus to integrate Yugoslavia and Bulgaria together and form the Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation. During November 1944 and January 1945, two countries' parties began to frequently exchange documents and delegations to negotiate the integration project (Bulgarian made three drafts, Yugoslavs made three drafts, and Soviets made one drafts). Huge differences occurred between Yugoslavs and Bulgarian on how to integrate Yugoslavia and Bulgaria: Yugoslavs proposed to form a federated country consists of seven republics (six existing republics from Yugoslavia plus Bulgaria as the seventh republic), one common parliament, and one federal government; Bulgarian leaders on the other side, proposed a federated government in which Bulgaria would have equal status with Yugoslavia, that is, one federal Yugoslavia plus Bulgaria.<sup>[20]</sup> Both sides couldn't reached a eclectic plan and hence the construction of Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation project was laid aside.

In August 1948, without notifying Moscow, Yugoslav and Bulgarian leaders arbitrarily signed the friendship and mutual assistance treaty, which greatly infuriated Stalin. Thus, in February 1948 at the Moscow tri-party meeting between Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, Stalin and Soviet foreign minister Molotov fiercely criticized Yugoslavs and Bulgarian self-assertive actions in pushing the formation of Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation.<sup>[21]</sup> This unpleasant meeting is the starting point of the Soviet-Yugoslav split. Later in that year, the Cominform issued a resolution calling all Eastern European communist parties to condemn Yugoslav communist party, which led to the rapid deterioration of mutual relationship between Yugoslavia and Soviet Union.<sup>[22]</sup> Facing tremendous pressures from Moscow, Bulgarian had to condemn that all obstructions to form the Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation were from Belgrade. Numerous rumors claiming that Tito was preparing to occupy and control Bulgaria emerged quickly after the Bulgarian reluctant condemnation. All previous treaties and agreements between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were cancelled. Both sides failed to achieve their strategic goals behind the construction of the Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation. For Soviets, they fail to contain Yugoslavia by fasten Yugoslavs connection to Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Soviets ambition to expand their influence to Balkan region using Eastern Europe as a springboard became impossible. For Yugoslavs, the first step to achieve their ambitious Belgrade-centred Balkan Federation failed because of the fundamental contradiction between Yugoslavs and Bulgarian on how to integrate two countries together and Soviets worry of a more and more self-assertive, expansionist Yugoslavia.

### **Yugoslav-Albanian Relation and Integration Attempt**

During the Second World War, The Comintern entrusted Yugoslav communist party to help establish communist party and instruct the guerrilla warfare in Albania. In 1939, Tito sent his comrade Konstantin Popovic to help Albanian form the communist party (later the Albanian Party of Labor). In November 1941, the Albanian communist party was formally established and it started to led the anti-Fascist guerrilla warfare in 1942. Albanians anti-Fascist struggle and national liberation campaign received tremendous support from Yugoslavs. Under this circumstance, Yugoslavia and

Albania gradually developed a special hypotactic relationship, which Soviets viewed as accordable to its strategic planning. Soviets were very happy about the intimate relationship between Yugoslavia and Albania. In May 1946, Stalin told to Tito that Yugoslavia should be a patron of Albania based on their mutual trust and their long cooperating history.<sup>[23]</sup> This unique relation was further developed during the early post-war period. In July 1947, Yugoslavs and Albanian signed the friendship and mutual assistance treaty, after which many Yugoslavs military officers entered Albania to serve as advisors and instructors. In November the same year, two countries reach an agreement to coordinate the economic plan, establish bi-national corporation company, remove tariffs, and unified the currency system. Politically, Yugoslavs could participate, influence and even decide policy outcomes in Albania. Diplomatically, the two countries had reached agreements that Yugoslavs embassies and other diplomatic institutions overseas were entrusted to represent Albania. Militarily, Yugoslavia not only used military consultants to influence and control Albanian army, but also directly stationed troops in Albanian territory.<sup>[24]</sup> At that time the French ambassador in Yugoslavia even asserted that Albania had become a satellite state of Yugoslavia.<sup>[25]</sup>

With a rapid growing mutual relationship, Yugoslavs began to think about incorporating Albania into Yugoslavia, which is an important step to both increase Yugoslavs political influence in Balkan region and to form the future Balkan Federation. The growing tie between Yugoslavia and Albania quickly aroused Soviets suspicion that all treaties and agreements signed between Yugoslavia and Albania were prepared for Yugoslavs later attempt to incorporate Albania. Soviets overall influence in both Balkan region and in socialist community would be greatly compromised if Yugoslavia become more and more strong and independent from Moscow. “It is intolerable for Moscow to see another ‘Belgrade center’ occur outside the ‘Moscow center’.”<sup>[26]</sup> Soviets concern was further deepened when Tito openly claimed that Albania would join Yugoslavia sooner or later with a Soviet ambassador in April 1946.

Soviets counteractions started at Stalin’s meeting with Albanian leader Enver Hoxha. As early as in June 1946, Stalin had clearly expressed to Yugoslavs that “It is not the time to establish a federation with Albania”<sup>[27]</sup> In July 1947, Stalin invited Hoxha to visit Moscow. During the Hoxha’s visit, Stalin repeatedly emphasized that Albania is a “sovereign independent country” which has the right to establish equal relationship with other countries and other countries do not have the right to intervene Albania’s internal affairs. In August the same year, the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU) issued an assessment toward Yugoslav foreign policy, claiming that Yugoslavs was trying to monopolize foreign relations and restrain Albanian diplomatic contact with Soviet Union. After the clear indication of its attitude, Moscow’s policies began to lean to Albanian side, which aimed to contain Yugoslavs expansion. While Yugoslavs on the other side saw Soviets were trying to replace Yugoslavs role over Albania.<sup>[28]</sup>

The tension between Yugoslavia and Soviet Union quickly escalated after Yugoslavs secret troop deployment in Southern Albania, which led to the outbreak of the first Soviet-Yugoslav Crisis. On 19 January 1948, after Yugoslav leader Milovan Dilas sent report about his meeting with Stalin back to Belgrade, Tito immediately contacted Hoxha claiming that there is an immediate threat to Albania that a Greece reactionary fascist force backed by United States and Britain would very possibly invade Albania. Thus, Tito proposed that Albania should provide a military base at Korce in Southern Albania for one Yugoslav division to station in order to deter the invaders.<sup>[29]</sup> From Moscow’s view, Tito’s self-assertive action to bypass Soviets and secretly negotiated with Albanian was very dangerous which could challenge Soviet absolute authority in the socialist community. Additionally, Moscow wasn’t sure that Yugoslavs were preparing to forcefully incorporate Albania by proposing to station troop in Albanian territory. Paradoxically, it is previous Soviet admittance of

Yugoslavs role in Albanian affairs that made Yugoslavs leader think they can bypass Soviets and directly influence Albanian policies. On one side Soviets were cautiously contain Tito's attempt to expand in Balkan, on the other side Tito was eagle to start his ambitious "Balkan Federation" project. Under the pressure from Moscow, Tito could do nothing but to withdraw its previous agreements and treaties with Albania. Again, the irreconcilable strategic interests between Soviet Union and Yugoslavia obstructed Yugoslavs ambitious march toward the Belgrade-centered Balkan Federation.

### **The Question of Trieste**

Following the end of the Second World War, Yugoslavia started to negotiated with other related countries about the final settlements of Trieste. This territorial dispute was not directly related to Soviet Union, but Soviets unilateral defence of the status quo with other Western power came at the cost of Yugoslavs interests, which generated significantly distrust and later led to the complete split between Yugoslavia and Soviet Union.

Before the First World War, Trieste was under the Ottoman Empire's control. During the First World War, Italy put forward a proposal to Triple Entente that Italy would join their side against Germany on the condition that Italy would take control of Adriatic Sea region, which includes Trieste region. British and French accepted the Italian proposal and they secretly signed the treaty in London. After the end of the First World War, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia expanded its territory to the Adriatic sea region and incorporate the Trieste region, which made the previous secret London treaty invalid. Unsatisfied with current situation, Italy dispatched military forces to occupy Trieste in 1918.<sup>[30]</sup> Following the Nazi's retreat in Trieste at the end of the Second World War, both Yugoslavia and other Allied countries wanted to gain control of this region. On 27 April 1945, in a letter to Truman, Churchill explicitly states that it is very important for allied countries to occupy Trieste before Tito's guerrillas...so we could have legal advantage if territorial dispute over Trieste occur.<sup>[31]</sup> But Yugoslavs occupied Trieste two days before other allied force, which led to British condemn that Tito's action had exceeded the previous agreement between allied countries. Tito's strategy, however, was to force other allied country to accept the status quo by occupying Trieste in ahead of other allied countries.

In July 1945, Four allied countries' foreign minister met together and discussed about the settlement of Trieste (Soviet Union, United States, Britain, and France). Without any previous notification or negotiation with Tito, Soviets foreign minister Molotov accepted the French proposal which intends to divide Trieste region into two different control area—the first region would be controlled collectively by United States and Britain while the second would be under Yugoslavs regulation. Fearing a direct confrontation with other Western allies, Soviet chose to sacrifice Yugoslavs interest in Trieste and reached compromise without Yugoslavs participation to demonstrate that Soviets are not willing to provoke other western allies. Soviets unilateral acceptance of the proposal greatly infuriated Tito. In a speech at Ljubljana, Tito explicitly stated that Yugoslavia wouldn't be involved in any geopolitical competition for spheres of influence and its national interests wouldn't be regarded as political leverage for certain countries in international negotiations.<sup>[32]</sup> Due to the Soviets unilateral action, Yugoslavs occupation ahead of other allied countries became unavailing. Soviets compromise in the negotiation prevented a direct confrontation between the Western bloc and the Soviet bloc, but it also generated significant distrust which made Tito think that Soviets are willing to sacrifice Yugoslavs interests in order to defend its own interest. Tito's growing distrust and dissatisfaction of Soviet actions, combined with two countries

fundamental difference of geostrategies, finally led to the outbreak of the First Soviet-Yugoslav Crisis.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion of three geopolitical clashes of interests between Soviet Union and Yugoslavia showed the “Zero-Sum” character in Soviet-Yugoslav relation. Soviets gains were always accompanied with Yugoslavs losses:

A) In the Greek Civil War, fearing to provoke the postwar international order preset in Yalta and Potsdam, Soviets were extreme conservative in aiding the Greek Communist Revolution. Yugoslavs, however, trying to expand their influence in Balkan region, enthusiastically support the Greek communist revolution. Due to Stalin’s refusal to challenge the Western dominating status in Greece, Yugoslavs failed to spread the socialist revolution to Greece and establish a pro-Yugoslav government.

B) In the “Balkan Federation” project, Yugoslavs seek to form the Yugoslav-Bulgarian Federation, and then inviting other socialist countries in Balkan to join the Federation. This “Balkan Federation” project quickly caused Soviets suspicion. They feared that their influence in Balkan region and Eastern Europe would be challenged by a growing independent and powerful Yugoslavia. Hence, Soviets expelled Yugoslavs out of the Cominform and denounced their attempt as to control Bulgaria and establish their own sphere of influence.

C) In building Yugoslav-Albania relation, Tito tried to integrate two countries together for the future construction of “Balkan Federation”. It was the previous Soviets admittance of Yugoslavs role in Albanian affairs that made Yugoslavs think they could bypass Soviets and push the integration project in Albania. Yugoslavs bypassed Soviets and directly negotiated with Albanian, which greatly infuriated Stalin. Fearing that Tito’s challenge of Soviet authority would spread to the Eastern Europe, Stalin decided to call off the integration plan using its supreme authority in the socialist community.

D) In the final settlement of Trieste, without any notification or negotiation with Yugoslavs, Soviets decided to sacrifice Yugoslavia’s territorial interests in prevention of a direct escalation between two Cold War blocs.

We can summarized that the struggle for powers and influences in the Balkan region between Soviet Union and Yugoslavia is the cause that led to the first crack within the socialist bloc. And in these geostrategic clashes, Yugoslavs certainly suffered more losses. It is these losses that made Tito realize how important the national independence is. Learning lessons from these geostrategic losses, Tito started to march on a unique path of international relations—Non-alignment Movement. And Titoism, the symbol of fearless resistance to Soviet authority, gradually spread to other countries such as China, Albania, Poland and Hungary. More and more leaders rose up to oppose the Soviets interventions and controls over their countries internal affairs and governances, which led to the Sino-Soviet split, Soviet-Albanian split, the Polish and Hugarian events, the Spring of Prague..... These gaps between the socialist community began to widen and they finally led to the collapse of the whole bloc in the early 1990s.

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