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France's Sale of Rafale Fighter Jets to Serbia

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SYNOPSIS

On August 29, 2024, France signed a historic agreement with Serbia, including the sale of 12 Rafale aircraft, valued at €2.7 billion, to the Balkan nation. The multirole fighter aircraft, produced by the French company Dassault Aviation, are expected to be delivered between 2028 and 2029. While this deal appears to be an economic success for France and a logical strategic choice for Serbia, it has raised many questions in Europe, particularly because of Belgrade's close ties with Moscow and Beijing.

COMMENTARY

France and Serbia share a rich history of strong relations. In the 14th century, the marriage of Serbian King Uroš to Hélène d'Anjou of France left a significant cultural impact on Serbia. The Franco-Serbian queen was even canonised by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

During the 19th century, ties strengthened as Serbian revolutionaries looked to Napoleon Bonaparte for support, and many Serbian elites studied in Paris. On the eve of World War I, the two countries were steadfast allies and one of the essential links in the complex network of alliances that triggered the war following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian member of the organisation Young Bosnia. The two countries actively collaborated during the war, particularly on the Eastern Front.

After World War II, Yugoslavia – of which Serbia was a part – became communist while France joined NATO. Tensions peaked when France participated in NATO bombings against Serbian forces in Bosnia in 1995 and the bombing of Belgrade in 1999. [In 2008](#), France recognised Kosovo's independence, which Serbia did not accept.

A Tenuous Relationship

Since then, relations between the two countries have had their ups and downs. France maintains a strong cultural presence in Serbia, which joined the International Organization of the Francophonie (OIF) as an observer in 2006. Around 120,000 people of Serbian origin live in France. The two countries signed a strategic partnership in 2011 to support Serbia's preparation for European Union integration.

However, underlying tensions remain. Serbia was [offended](#) by the absence of its President from the main tribune in Paris during the centenary commemorations of World War I in 2018, especially since Hashim Thaçi, then President of Kosovo and indicted for war crimes, was seated at the main podium.

In August 2024, Serbia purchased 12 Rafale aircraft, valued at €2.7 billion, from France. This deal symbolised the normalisation of relations between the two countries. Under the deal, Serbia will acquire nine single-seat and three two-seat Rafales, to be delivered between 2028 and 2029, replacing its ageing MiG-29s.

The Rafale, a symbol of French industrial excellence and a significant export success, has contributed to making [France the world's second-largest arms seller](#), especially in the Indo-Pacific region, where countries like India, the UAE, and Indonesia acquire the French aircraft. However, the Rafale's success in Europe has been more modest, with only Croatia and Greece making purchases, some of which were reconditioned aircraft.

Buying weapons, particularly fighter jets, is not a politically neutral act. It involves cooperation on training, doctrine, and technology transfers, and sometimes on ammunition supply, which has geopolitical implications and long-term strategic significance. This deal will help to normalise the Franco-Serbian relationship for many years to come.

A Strategic Shift for Serbia?

Although not a member of NATO, Serbia has been seeking EU membership since 2012. However, it maintains strong ties with Russia due to shared cultural, historical and religious links. Serbia and Russia signed a strategic partnership in 2009, which was deepened in 2013 and has not been affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has repeatedly refused to apply EU [sanctions against Moscow](#). Although Serbia is traditionally a buyer of Russian weapons, supplies from Russia have been scarce since the start of the Ukraine war, leading Serbia to diversify its sources of imports, especially from France.

French President Emmanuel Macron views the Rafale deal as a way to "[anchor](#)" Serbia to the EU, with accession talks having stalled for years. Selling advanced equipment like the Rafale aims to reduce Moscow's influence on Belgrade. Macron has highlighted the positives, [stating](#) that the "Rafale club" can "contribute to peace in Europe" and offer a "tremendous opportunity for regional integration". This optimistic impetus from the French President was quickly tempered by President Vučić who

[responded](#), "I know Emmanuel [Macron] would like us to impose sanctions [on Russia], but we won't, and we're not ashamed of it".

Security Concerns

The French-Serbian agreement has raised severe criticisms in France and Europe.

Some aeronautics professionals [fear](#) that the French technology could be copied or reproduced by the Russians due to its proximity and influence in the Serb security architecture. The improper use of the Rafale fighter jets could also be a concern, particularly in regions bordering Kosovo, which Serbia does not recognise.

There are still thousands of NATO soldiers in Kosovo, including French forces, as part of the [KFOR operation](#). What would happen to these troops if Serbia decided to intervene in Kosovo?

[Another concern](#) is Serbia's close ties with China. As Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) reminded during his visit to Belgrade in May 2024, Serbia has been China's strategic partner in Central Europe since 2016. Furthermore, since 2019, Serbia has borrowed US\$8 billion from China for infrastructure renovation.

The strong Sino-Serbian relationship also has a security dimension. In 2022, the Serbian Armed Forces [acquired](#) the Chinese air defence system FK-3, an export version of the HQ-22 system. Equipped with a passive electronically scanned array radar and four missile launchers, it is theoretically effective against targets at altitudes up to 27,000 m and distances up to 100 km. Experts fear that the characteristics of the Rafale's radar could be "evaluated" by the Chinese system, allowing Beijing to gather valuable information about the French aircraft.

Since Serbia is among the few countries possessing Russian, Chinese, Western, and domestic air force equipment, it will be interesting to see how all these disparate equipment can be compatible. This is of interest not only to Serbia but also to Chinese, Russian, and Western suppliers, which may not have equipment from other countries.

Serbia's Future Pivotal Role in European Geopolitics?

While the Rafale agreement reflects the bilateral and national interests of France and Serbia, there is also a regional perspective in the long term. Serbia has a long tradition of pursuing multi-vector diplomatic strategies by adopting a [balanced approach](#) to international relations. It has maintained strong ties with Russia, is a candidate for EU membership, and maintains positive relations with the United States. Additionally, it has cultivated connections with China, Turkey, and the Arab states.

President Vučić has managed to navigate and balance these diverse interests effectively, following astute diplomacy inherited from the Josip Broz Tito years when Yugoslavia was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement. From this perspective, the Franco-Serbian fighter jet agreement underscores Belgrade's growing role as a facilitator and intermediary in European geopolitics, specifically if France and Russia were to normalise their relations following the war in Ukraine.

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