

SECURING NATO'S SOUTHEASTERN EUROPEAN FRONT

How Kosovo Police Special Forces and the Special Intervention Unit (SIU) Are Containing Serbian-Russian Hybrid Threats and Safeguarding U.S. Interests in the Western Balkans



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POLICY BRIEF

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I. Executive Summary

Between September 1-10, 2025, a senior team of The American Center for Combating Extremism and Terrorism (ACCET)—a U.S. based organization—led by Arjanit Shehu, ACCET Executive Director, conducted an assessment that outlines the evolving threat landscape in Southeastern Europe, in particular northern Kosovo, following the September 2023 terrorist attack in Banjska, orchestrated by a Serbian paramilitary group with alleged ties to Russian security structures. The incident is emblematic of the hybrid threats proliferating across Southeastern Europe—where proxy violence, disinformation, and state-sponsored subversion increasingly threaten U.S. interests, NATO unity, and the lives of U.S. diplomats and servicemen.

Trump Administration's National Security Strategy and defense priorities rightfully place principled realism, burden sharing, and protection of American interests at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy. President Trump's clear-eyed and principled direction is clear: U.S. allies and partners must assume greater responsibility for their own defense. The Kosovo Police Special Forces and the Special Intervention Unit (SIU) exemplify this model: a capable, pro-American partner force delivering concrete security results on the ground, deterring Russian-Serbian hybrid threats, and safeguarding U.S. personnel and interests—all without requiring large-scale U.S. deployments. In line with Trump's emphasis on "America First" and cost-effective alliances, supporting Kosovo's security sector is not an act of charity, but a strategic investment that strengthens NATO's southeastern flank, projects American influence, and constrains adversary expansion at minimal cost to the United States.

As articulated in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS), the United States views the Western Balkans (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Albania) as a critical front in the global contest between democracy and authoritarianism. Nowhere is this contest more acute than in Serbia, which has become a regional hub for Russian intelligence operations, malign influence, and covert regional destabilization campaigns.

Moscow has embedded itself deeply within Serbia's political, military, and security institutions—leveraging historical, cultural, and economic ties to exert disproportionate control over the country's decision-making and foreign policy orientation. The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Military Intelligence (GRU), and Federal Security Service (FSB) maintain extensive networks of officers and informants operating through platforms such as the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center in Serbia's city of Niš, widely believed to serve as a GRU outpost under diplomatic cover.^[1] These operations are augmented by a vast ecosystem of Russian-aligned media, pro-Kremlin NGOs, Serbian veterans' associations, and Orthodox Church actors.^[2]



This infrastructure enables Russia to conduct active measures such as:

- Supporting Serbian nationalist paramilitaries, including those implicated in the 2023 Banjska attack in Kosovo, widely seen as a proxy assault on Western-supported governance^[3];
- Launching disinformation and propaganda campaigns against NATO, the EU, and Western Balkans states institutions, via media platforms like Sputnik Srbija and RT Balkan^[4];
- Coordinating cyber operations and surveillance against Western Balkans governments, in particular Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro, and Western missions^[5];
- Facilitating arms transfers, training, and command structures to Serb militias with latent mobilization potential in northern Kosovo and Republika Srpska in Bosnia^[6].

These activities serve Russia's strategic objective: to stall Euro-Atlantic integration, undermine democratic transitions, and fracture the regional security architecture that undergirds NATO and protects U.S. interests. Serbia offers Russia a permissive environment, reinforced by its military neutrality policy, access to security services, and refusal to join EU sanctions against Russia.^[7]

In this operational context, Kosovo emerges as a forward-operating partner against foreign malign influence. Its alignment with U.S. and NATO interests and priorities, coupled with an increasingly professionalized security apparatus, positions it as a key actor in resisting intelligence penetration and hybrid threats. The Kosovo Police Special Forces and The Special Intervention Unit (SIU) are not merely domestic law enforcement bodies—they are strategically vital components of the broader U.S.-led effort to contain Russian subversion and stabilize NATO's southeastern flank.

At the forefront of the defense against these destabilization efforts is the Kosovo Police Special Forces, particularly the elite Special Intervention Unit (SIU). Their operational capabilities—ranging from counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and direct action to intelligence-led interdiction—have proven decisive in neutralizing threats, disrupting cross-border insurgent and criminal networks, dismantling Serbia-backed parallel command structures, protecting U.S. and European diplomatic missions and act as first responders protecting U.S. and NATO servicemen lives.

The Kosovo Police, acting under the directions and in close coordination with U.S. diplomatic mission and military advisors, and NATO's KFOR presence, function not only as national protectors of Kosovo's sovereignty, but as strategic force multipliers for U.S. defense and foreign policy objectives. Their actions directly contribute to:

- Deterring malign influence from Russia and its regional proxies,
- Protecting deployed U.S. personnel and military assets,
- Preserving regional stability as a pillar of European security,
- Protecting U.S. diplomatic mission and infrastructure in Kosovo, and
- Defending the integrity of NATO's southeastern flank.

In this context, sustained U.S. investment in Kosovo's security architecture—through Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET), intelligence cooperation, and doctrinal alignment—is not a matter of regional policy alone. It is a core requirement for advancing America's global interests, projecting credible deterrence, and ensuring that fragile democracies are not left vulnerable to authoritarian coercion.



II. Strategic Context and Geopolitical Significance

The Western Balkans remain a strategically volatile and ideologically contested space where revisionist adversaries—chiefly the Russian Federation—are exploiting political instability to undermine U.S. interests, fracture NATO cohesion, and challenge Western dominance in Europe. The region represents a critical pressure point of great power competition, which defines Russia as a hostile actor seeking to restore its great power status and sphere of influence by undermining U.S. allies and partnerships. Within this arena, Serbia has emerged as Moscow's most loyal regional platform, enabling Kremlin-backed operations through a well-developed network of disinformation actors, intelligence channels, and paramilitary proxies. Serbia offers Russia something no other partner in the region does: direct access to EU and NATO borders through pliable institutions, sympathetic media ecosystems, and ethnic enclaves positioned to trigger conflict under Moscow's coordination.

The September 2023 terrorist attack in Banjska, northern Kosovo, served as a high-impact demonstration of this hybrid playbook. A Serbian paramilitary unit, equipped with Russian-grade weaponry and logistics, launched a coordinated assault on Kosovo Police positions, killing a police officer and occupying a religious site. It marked the formal crossing of a red line: the evolution from low-grade political interference to overt state-enabled terrorism aimed at eroding Kosovo's state sovereignty and provoking regional escalation.

From the Trump Administration's perspective, this incident aligns with the broader threat matrix facing America and its partners: "gray zone" aggression designed to weaken Western resolve without triggering direct military confrontation. It is the type of asymmetric, deniable, and corrosive conflict that Moscow has perfected in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—and now seeks to replicate in Baltic countries, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and the Western Balkans using Serbia as a launchpad.

For the United States, Kosovo is not simply a post-war reconstruction project—it is a forward-operating buffer zone between Western-led democratic order and authoritarian encroachment. It is the most vocal pro-American, strategically located partner that has consistently aligned itself with U.S. global priorities, including support for Israel, counterterrorism cooperation, sanctions enforcement against Russia, and NATO partnership programs.

At the tactical level, Kosovo Police Special Forces and the elite Special Intervention Unit (SIU) represent a low-cost, high-impact tool for advancing the President Trump Administration powerful concept of principled realism: strengthening sovereign nations that defend themselves, act in America's interests, and reduce the need for direct U.S. troop commitments. These units serve not only as domestic security guarantors but as extensions of the U.S. perimeter of influence—performing deterrence, stabilization, and counterterrorism missions that protect U.S. interests and personnel, defend allied territory, and contain hostile foreign influence.



This model fits squarely within the Trump Administration's emphasis on:

- 1 America First and Make America Great Again.
- 2 Transactional and interest-based alliances rather than endless nation-building.
- 3 Ending wars and conflicts.
- 4 Transactional and interest-based alliances rather than endless nation-building.
- 5 Force protection and operational freedom over abstract diplomatic platitudes.
- 6 Burden sharing through capable local partners
- 7 Unapologetic defense of national sovereignty against globalist or revisionist threats.

**AC CET
Executive Director
Shehu with Special
Intervention Unit (SIU)
team**



The Banjska Attack



III. Detailed Incident Analysis: The Banjska Attack

The Banjska attack clarified what the Trump administration had long warned: the Balkans are not "post-conflict"—they are pre-crisis, and the front line is already active. Supporting Kosovo's ability to defend itself, dismantle Russian-Serbian proxy networks, and hold territory under democratic control is not merely helpful—it is a strategic requirement for sustaining U.S. influence in Europe without overextending American resources.

Event Summary:

On 24 September 2023, a well-equipped Serbian paramilitary unit ambushed Kosovo Police officers in the village of Banjska, northern Kosovo. The ambush resulted in the death of Police Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku, multiple injuries, and triggered a standoff at a Serbian Orthodox monastery.

Key Tactical Findings:

- The 100-strong attackers deployed military-grade equipment: armored personnel carriers (APCs), anti-tank weapons, drones, encrypted communications, and pre-positioned logistics.
- Over €5 million worth of weapons were confiscated, pointing to state-level resourcing and training, allegedly in Serbian military facilities.
- The group's leader, Milan Radoičić, a close associate of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and vice-president of the Serb List party, later admitted organizing the attack. He was briefly detained in Serbia but never prosecuted.
- Kosovo security agencies confirmed links between the attackers and Russian military advisors operating via Serbia's security infrastructure, including intelligence cooperation, ideological support, and information warfare.

Operational Response:

- The Kosovo Police Special Forces, supported by the First Intervention Team, executed a rapid containment operation.
- They secured the monastery, neutralized threats, neutralized multiple attackers, and reestablished territorial control and security within 36 hours.

Kosovo's Counter-Hybrid Response Architecture: Role of the Kosovo Police Special Forces and SIU:

- **Specialized Training:** SIU units are trained in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, hostage rescue, sniper operations, and chemical/biological response—skills directly aligned with U.S. CT strategy.
- **Crisis Response:** Their rapid deployment to Banjska, as well as subsequent raids in Zvečan, Leposavić, and North Mitrovica, disrupted logistical cells and weapons networks.
- **Protection of U.S. Personnel:** SIU and Special Forces coordinate daily with U.S. KFOR personnel and NATO liaison officers. U.S. defense installations and civilian assets rely heavily on SIU as a front-line security guarantor.

Interagency Coordination:

- The Kosovo Police Intelligence Directorate, working alongside U.S. counterparts, has increased operational intelligence-sharing post-Banjska.
- The SIU conducts joint drills with U.S. Military and NATO-KFOR Tactical Battalions.

Broader Security Threats: 2024–2025. Ongoing Hybrid Operations:

- **January–April 2025:** Kosovo Police dismantled Serbian-backed “parallel institutions” in the north, including an illegal tax collection agency and logistical support networks.
- **February–April 2025:** Police uncovered additional weapons caches and uniforms belonging to “Civilna Zaštita” (Serbian paramilitary protection force linked to past conflict operations).
- **April 2025:** Sixteen individuals, including active-duty Serbian intelligence operatives, were arrested for espionage and aiding terrorism.



How the Banjska Attack Mirrors Russia's Crimea-Donbas Playbook:

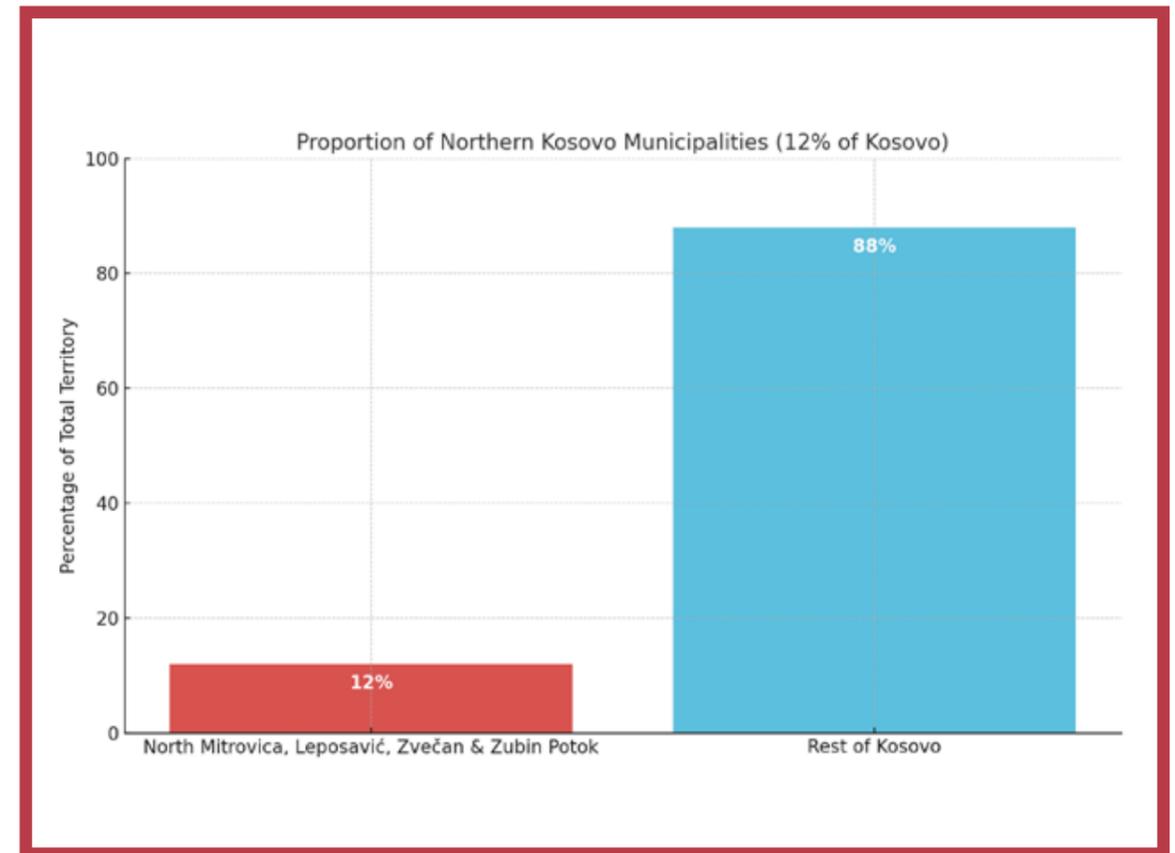
The Banjska terrorist attack in northern Kosovo on 24 September 2023 bore striking resemblance to the tactics deployed by Russian forces during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the initiation of armed conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk. In both cases, Moscow orchestrated a campaign of hybrid warfare—arming and infiltrating irregular paramilitary forces, exploiting ethnic tensions, and creating a false narrative of local resistance to justify subsequent territorial claims or intervention.



The Serbian paramilitary unit involved in Banjska, led by Milan Radoičić and linked to both Serbian state structures and Russian influence networks, adopted a nearly identical approach: they infiltrated Kosovo under cover of night, used military-grade weapons to ambush Kosovo Police, occupied religious and strategic facilities, and attempted to provoke an escalation that could be framed as a “protection of Serbs” narrative. The Serb population makes up around 5% of Kosovo's total population and is largely concentrated in the northern municipalities of North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan, and Zubin Potok, **which together comprise approximately 12% of Kosovo's territory.**

Much like the so-called “little green men” in Crimea, these masked and heavily armed fighters wore unmarked gear, carried advanced equipment including APCs and anti-armor weapons, and were supported by a sophisticated disinformation campaign aimed at portraying Kosovo's government as an aggressor. The broader strategic intent appears to have been to destabilize Kosovo's northern municipalities, create conditions for de facto Serb control, and potentially trigger international pressure for territorial partition—mirroring the precedent Moscow set in eastern Ukraine. This model, known as “escalate to freeze,” aims not at outright conquest but at manufacturing a semi-permanent conflict zone, where the rule of law is suspended, NATO is weakened, and Russia-aligned actors exert disproportionate influence.

In this context, Banjska must be understood not as an isolated incident, but as a test case for Russia's irregular warfare model—one now exported via Serbian proxies to the Western Balkans. Its failure, due to the swift response of the Kosovo Police Special Forces and Special Intervention Unit (SIU), disrupted what could have been the first phase of a long-term “Donbas-style” scenario—one designed to challenge NATO, threaten U.S. troops, and block Kosovo's path to Euro-Atlantic integration.



IV. Strategic Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy: Why Kosovo Matters for U.S. National Security

- **Containment of Russian Influence:** Kosovo is a frontline state in the ideological and security contest between liberal democracy and authoritarian expansionism. Support to Kosovo's institutions directly blunts Russian efforts to extend its reach in Europe.
- **NATO Integration and Interoperability:** Kosovo's security forces—especially SIU—are aligned full with U.S. interests and act in coordination with U.S. forces and officials, aligned with U.S. training doctrine, rules of engagement, and interoperability standards. Supporting them strengthens NATO's southeastern flank.
- **Force Protection:** With hundreds of U.S. soldiers deployed under KFOR and various advisory capacities, Kosovo's internal stability is crucial to American troop safety and operational freedom.
- **Resilience Against Hybrid Threats:** The Banjska incident proves that terrorism, organized crime, intelligence operations, and disinformation can be deployed in tandem. Kosovo's response offers a model for countering such threats through local capacity, regional cooperation, and international alignment.

The Republic of Kosovo stands today not merely as a young democracy striving toward Euro-Atlantic integration, but as a critical geopolitical buffer in the evolving era of great power competition. In the heart of Southeastern Europe, Kosovo occupies a strategic fault line where Russian influence, Serbian paramilitarism, and Western democratic interests collide. The trajectory of this state—toward institutional consolidation or renewed destabilization—carries immediate and long-term implications for U.S. national security as defined by the National Security Strategy's focus on preserving American influence, confronting revisionist powers, and defending forward-deployed forces.



Containment of Russian Influence

The Trump Administration's National Security Strategy (NSS) defined Russia as a revisionist power seeking to "erode American security and prosperity" by destabilizing U.S. allies, expanding its regional spheres of influence, and undermining the rules-based international order.

Kosovo is a direct target of these ambitions. Russia continues to exploit Serbia as a strategic proxy—arming, training, and politically enabling Serb nationalist factions intent on undermining Kosovo's sovereignty and Western integration. The Banjska terrorist attack in September 2023, in which a Serbian paramilitary group armed with military-grade equipment stormed northern Kosovo, reflects this long-standing strategy of hybrid destabilization.

From a Trump Administration viewpoint, supporting Kosovo's institutions—particularly law enforcement and counter-terrorism forces like the Special Intervention Unit (SIU)—is a cost-effective way to blunt Russian influence without major U.S. troop deployments. This is in line with the Administration's push for "principled realism": advancing U.S. interests through selective, transactional partnerships with countries willing to defend themselves and uphold regional stability.

NATO Interoperability and Burden Sharing

Throughout his presidency, President Trump consistently emphasized that U.S. allies and partners must do more to share the burden of security responsibilities. Kosovo's security forces—especially the Kosovo Police Special Forces and SIU—stand out in the region as high-performing, U.S.-trained units that operate according to American interests, tactics, standards, and protocols.

By investing in Kosovo's force readiness, the U.S. strengthens a non-NATO partner that functions as a de facto security contributor to the southeastern flank of the Alliance. These forces regularly coordinate with U.S. KFOR units, conduct joint exercises with NATO elements, and engage in counterterrorism and crisis response missions aligned with U.S. doctrine.

Force Protection and Forward Presence

President's Trump NSS and NDS prioritized protecting American personnel and defending U.S. military freedom of action abroad. Kosovo remains host to a substantial U.S. military footprint through KFOR, as well as critical diplomatic, intelligence, and private-sector operations.

The volatility in northern Kosovo, fueled by Russian-backed Serbian proxies and organized criminal networks, poses a direct threat to American lives and missions. The Kosovo Police SIU and Special Forces play a frontline role in shielding U.S. staff, assets and installations, convoys, securing strategic infrastructure, responding to terrorist incidents, and neutralizing insurgent movements before they escalate into broader conflict.

In this light, Kosovo's internal stability becomes not a humanitarian concern, but a force protection imperative—a means to safeguard American interests without increasing U.S. troop commitments, a central principle of Trump's foreign policy.



Resilience Against Hybrid Threats and a Model for Regional Partners

The Banjska attack of 2023 underscores the complex nature of modern conflict—combining terrorism, disinformation, paramilitary aggression, and foreign intelligence backing. The Trump Administration consistently warned against such threats, identifying hybrid warfare as a key mechanism through which Russia, China, Iran, and other adversaries undermine U.S. influence without conventional war.

Kosovo's response—led by its elite Special Forces, supported by U.S. advisors—demonstrated precisely the kind of tactical readiness, institutional resilience, and partner-led response that the Trump team sought to encourage globally. Instead of relying on major U.S. deployments or multinational bureaucracy, Kosovo presents a scalable, autonomous model: a small democratic state defending itself with U.S.-aligned capabilities, delivering results that protect American interests and constrain adversary expansion.

This model aligns with Trump's "America First" approach—strategically backing countries that act as security providers, not dependents, and that uphold American-led stability through sovereignty, strength, and commitment.

Under the Trump Administration's vision of realist, interest-based foreign policy, Kosovo remains a valuable and underleveraged partner. Its geographic position, operational alignment with U.S. doctrine, and demonstrated will to fight back against Russian and Serbian destabilization efforts place it firmly within the category of "worthy strategic investment".

Supporting Kosovo's security sector—especially elite units like the SIU—is not about state-building for its own sake. It is about projecting U.S. power efficiently, protecting American assets, and constraining authoritarian influence at low cost and high return.





V. Recommendations for U.S. Government Action

To ensure long-term stability in the Western Balkans and safeguard vital U.S. interests, Washington must prioritize a robust security partnership with Kosovo, particularly through targeted support to its most capable and pro-American units: the Kosovo Police Special Forces and Special Intervention Unit (SIU). Expanding military assistance via Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET) will deepen operational interoperability and enhance Kosovo's readiness to respond to terrorism, insurgency, and hybrid threats. SIU should be elevated as a priority recipient of advanced counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism equipment and training and included in scenario-based joint exercises with U.S. and NATO special operations forces. Furthermore, Kosovo's growing role as a frontline defender against Russian-backed destabilization efforts necessitates its integration into regional intelligence fusion cells, as well as the creation of a U.S.-Kosovo Joint Task Force on hybrid threats—modeled on Baltic and Ukrainian precedents—to bolster SIGINT and HUMINT capabilities targeting malign foreign influence.

Parallel to this hard security posture, the U.S. must reinforce the strategic messaging, legal accountability, and institutional foundations that give Kosovo's democratic security response its credibility. Publicly commending Kosovo's swift and disciplined reaction to the Banjska attack—and its subsequent reforms—sends a clear message of confidence and partnership.

At the same time, U.S. embassies, allies, and public diplomacy tools should work to counter the false narratives pushed by Russian and Serbian disinformation networks, which aim to delegitimize Kosovo's sovereignty and provoke ethnic division. Diplomatically, the United States should condition elements of its security and economic support to Serbia on concrete steps to cooperate with Kosovo and extradite individuals indicted in the Banjska attack. In multilateral fora such as the OSCE, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the UN, U.S. leadership is essential in isolating Serbian obstructionism and reinforcing norms of accountability. Lastly, supporting long-term reforms in Kosovo's security sector—including doctrine harmonization with NATO and legal protections for law enforcement during crisis operations—will ensure that Kosovo remains not just a tactical ally, but a strategically aligned security partner in a volatile but vital region.

1 Expand Direct Assistance to Kosovo Special Forces and SIU:

- Increase U.S. military assistance under FMF and IMET.
- Prioritize SIU in capacity-building efforts, equipping, and scenario-based counter-terrorism exercises.

2 Deepen Intelligence Cooperation:

- Integrate SIU into regional intelligence fusion cells and bolster their SIGINT/HUMINT collection capability.
- Launch a U.S.-Kosovo Joint Task Force on hybrid threats, modeled on Baltic or Ukrainian partnerships.

3 Enhance Strategic Messaging:

- Publicly commend Kosovo's actions in Banjska and post-incident reforms.
- Undermine Russian-Serbian disinformation narratives through diplomatic messaging and support to Kosovo-based media resilience.

4 Apply Diplomatic Pressure on Serbia:

- Link U.S. military assistance and diplomatic support to Serbia's cooperation in extraditing indicted Banjska perpetrators.
- Leverage multilateral fora (NATO PA, OSCE, UN) to isolate Serbian non-cooperation.

5 Support Long-Term Security Sector Reform:

- Assist Kosovo in finalizing defense doctrine harmonization with NATO.
- Help codify rules of engagement and legal protections for Kosovo Police during crisis interventions in contested areas.

The Banjska terrorist attack exposed a volatile front in the global struggle between democratic resilience and authoritarian subversion. Kosovo's response—anchored by the courage and professionalism of its Police Special Forces and the First Intervention Team—has not only defended its own sovereignty but also shielded American personnel and strategic interests.

For U.S. policymakers, Kosovo offers a tested partner, a proven security force, and a democratic frontline worthy of enhanced engagement, security cooperation, and geopolitical investment.



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