

Dec 20 2011

New meaning for an old relationship: Serbia's arms deals during Gaddafi's reign

LSE Ideas

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Abandoned and captured military warehouses and depots in Libya revealed that the now ousted Mohammed Gaddafi kept his arms inventory exceptionally high. It should be no wonder that the civil war in this North African country was as brutal and bloody as it was. Countries like China, Russia and Italy found Libya to be a good customer for their military products. But what is often overlooked is that, even a small country like Serbia left an imprint in the Libyan civil war as a result of its weapon export policies. The most recent [Amnesty International](#) report revealed that Serbia exported a significant stock of small arms and ammunitions to Libya in the last five years. The question remains, how did Serbia manage to establish itself in the Libyan weapons market? One explanation is that Serbia inherited a large military industrial complex, well established during the Yugoslav era. More importantly, however, Belgrade profited from an old Yugoslav political legacy reflected in an obsolete, but not completely defunct, movement known as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

The birth of a warm relationship in very cold time

The NAM was Josip Broz Tito's brainchild that came into being in 1961, ideologically rooting a 'third way' alternative in the Cold War context. Libya joined the NAM under Gadhafi's leadership in the 1970s and during that time the two leaders developed a close relationship. The cordial friendship between the two eventually evolved in to a trade relationship in which Libya became a prime client for Yugoslav-made weapons. The 'crown deal' was an agreement in which Belgrade sold Libya 116 Yugoslav made 'Galeb G-2' jet-planes. It was the most significant arms deal Tito's Yugoslavia made in the 1970s. At that time Gaddafi acted as a menace to his neighbours with his aggressive Pan-Arabic sentiment, but Belgrade was never reprimanded for its actions. Even if it was challenged, Yugoslavia had the political backing of the NAM.

The post-Cold War era: friendship on the back burner

With the bloody dissolution of the Yugoslav federation, the weapons industry shared the fate of the country. The industrial basis was divided geographically between successor states, thus taking away the capacity of an integrated industry, capable of producing relatively advanced weapon systems like the famous M-84 main battle tank. In any case, each republic followed a different political path and some decided not to follow the Yugoslav pattern on nurturing foreign relations and doing business within that context. For example, while Slovenia was actively working to join the EU and NATO, Serbia was faced with political isolation for its role in the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. In a context of the international isolation Serbia was experiencing, Belgrade had only a few possible partners, and Libya was one of them. In hindsight, that was probably not the best decision because it was just adding to the bad image the country established with the civil wars in Bosnia and Croatia. It did not look good when a Tripoli-bound transport plane crashed near Belgrade in 1996, full of military equipment for the Libyan military. Serbia was slowly coming out of isolation and was not subject to an arms embargo at that particular moment, but Tripoli was. [International media](#) immediately reported that the plane carried military supplies for the Yugoslav-made weapons bought by Tripoli in the 1970s and 1980s. Serbia was far from being able to supply the same amount and quality of weapons as in the Yugoslav times, but pressed hard for foreign currency Belgrade was willing to maintain the Libyan relationship.

After Milosevic: in search for old-new partners

The collapse of the Milosevic regime in 2000 accelerated Serbia's advance from a decade of isolation. It was crucial for the country to revitalize the economy after a long stagnation by returning to some old markets where Libya was on top of the priority list. Dragan Sutanovac, Serbian Minister of defence since 2007, [explained](#) the Serbian strategy quite simply that "we took the books from the past" and realized that our chance was the NAM market". After 10 years of isolation, Serbia needed serious business deals that would give the economy an impulse. Therefore, it seems that the scope of the Serbian strategy was rather simple: re-start the ex-Yugoslav capacities, align them to the current conditions and offer well known products for low prices to some old well known partners. Serbia was desperate to offer its military products and expertise, and Libya was happy to continue that cooperation. Consequently, Serbia immediately jumped on the Libyan offer to repair 24 Yugoslav-era jets in the mid 2000s. It was a decent start for a dormant industry trying to find a new lease of life.

Re-invention of a traditional partnership

The Serbian efforts eventually gave some significant financial results. According to Mr. Dragan Sutanovac, the expected profit from deals negotiated between Serbia and Libya reached roughly [500 millions dollars](#). Some of that money was planned for

infrastructural projects like a military hospital in Tripoli – a clone to the one Serbia has for its own purposes in Belgrade. The deal included training of medical personal at all levels. Contracts for small arms and ammunition were also negotiated, as well as training of pilots and other professional profiles necessary to maintain military capability.

It is important to note that these relations between Tripoli and Belgrade were not secret. They were often exploited in domestic media in Serbia. As a matter of fact, even well known [foreign media](#) showed an increasing interest in the revival of the military industry in Serbia. The government in Belgrade saw the ideal opportunity to promote the country on the international weapons market. The strategy worked quite well. At present, Serbia negotiates deals with countries like [Algeria](#), [Angola](#), [Indonesia](#), [Myanmar](#), [Iraq](#), and [Azerbaijan](#). It is not a coincidence that many of these countries were (and still are) members of the NAM. In 2010, the government in [Belgrade organized a NAM conference](#), and Serbia used the opportunity to renew past political and economic relationships.

Serbian problems in the Libyan Desert

Most of the countries mentioned in the paragraph are not examples of democracy. The democratic track record of countries like Algeria or Angola is well known to the world. That often puts Belgrade on the spot, especially considering Serbia's own past record. The issue of weapons trade with non-democratic regimes became more problematic as some media speculated about the presence of Serbian mercenaries in Libya during the 2011 civil war. The government in Belgrade was forced to officially [deny](#) all involvement in Libya. For the record, no hard evidence was ever offered that Serbian mercenaries fought in Libya. By early [March 2011](#) the Serbian government issued another statement in which it maintained that all military cooperation with Tripoli was suspended for the time being. However, it should not go unnoticed that the same jet planes Serbia [refurbished](#) in the mid-2000s were briefly used to attack the rebels in the spring of 2011.

Back to square one?

At this point it seems certain that the Belgrade's 'NAM credit' expired for good in Libya when Gaddafi was toppled from power. In context of current developments, it is unclear whether Serbia will be able to renew its contacts with the new authorities in Tripoli, considering their past cooperation with Gadhafi. In the autumn of 2011 Mr. Sutanovac expressed his hope that Serbia and Libya should continue their [cooperation](#) in context of the traditionally good relations between the two countries.

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