

China-US tensions rising over the Balkans, LSE paper reports

China's expanding influence, and the US' pushback against it, is increasingly influencing the policies of Balkan states, reveals a strategic update from LSE IDEAS, LSE's foreign policy think tank.

However, according to Dr Ivan Lidarev, Sotirov Visiting Fellow at LSE IDEAS, it's misleading to characterise this competition as an attempt to completely dominate the region as Washington is clearly the preeminent power, buttressed by NATO's overwhelming presence in Southeastern Europe and strong bilateral relations with most Balkan states.

Instead, it should be understood as China's attempt to use the Balkans as a gateway through which to influence the EU via trade and investment, while the US attempts to close this 'back door,' Lidarev explains.

He believes this competition has created a new strategic framework for the region, with China emerging as a counterweight to the West, prompting the US to reengage with the area.

Most Balkan states have sought to align themselves with the US and partially distance themselves from China, with Serbia being the major exception. However, Washington has been unable to entirely eliminate Beijing's influence.

This contest promises more opportunities for economic development and faster integration with the EU for Balkan countries, Lidarev says. However, he claims this will be coupled with constraints on individual states' bilateral relations with China and the strategic risks posed by a potential 'New Cold War' in the region.

While the US has the upper hand for now, Chinese influence in the Balkans is here to stay and Beijing may achieve its strategic goal of opening a gateway to the EU in future, Lidarev believes.

He suggests Balkan states' pro-Washington alignment could shift in the coming years if the cost-benefit analysis changes.

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For more information, a copy of the full strategic update, or to hear from Dr Ivan Lidarev, contact Jamie Hose at BlueSky Education on jamie@bluesky-pr.com, or call +44 (0)1582 790 706