

---

## Croatia – the “Gateway” to Southeast Europe<sup>1</sup>

---

VLATKO CVRtilA

Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb

### Summary

As a democratic and economically developed country, with interests that do not differ from those of Western democracies, the Republic of Croatia may well represent a decisive factor in future efforts to stabilize Southeast Europe. Croatia plays a very important role in the regional geopolitical configuration and can potentially influence the future development of neighboring countries and other regions, especially by continuing to make noticeable headway in its recently reinvigorated democratic transition and by further advancing the development of good-neighborly relations. Therefore, its role in the greater area is also very important. Croatia’s future geopolitical initiatives, aimed towards stabilization and security of the region, can be perceived in regard to its significance in global and regional geopolitical structures—partaking in the fragmentation processes of Southeast Europe and its geographical, cultural, religious and historical geopolitical surroundings.

### *Introduction*

The end of the cold war and the corresponding changes in the basic elements and relationships of the old global order has not automatically brought the initially anticipated security and stability to Europe. By the early 1990’s, a divided Europe entered a new phase of its development, marked by integration and disintegration processes. It is interesting to note that these processes were regionally based, whereby, integration is associated with the West and disintegration with the events in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. After the failure of communist systems, Eastern Europe entered a process of political and economic transitions, while in the Balkans, war and tragic conflicts emerged, lasting sporadically since 1991. Due to the war on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, normal routs of transportation, economic cooperation and political, scien-

<sup>1</sup> Two labels are used to describe the geographical area between the Adriatic and Black seas: the Balkans and Southeast Europe. Neither label fully satisfies the geographic representation of the area described above. The term *Balkans* has, through historical circumstances, obtained a more political connotation, while Southeast Europe is more of a geographical description of the area (See: Klemenčić, Mladen, South-East Europe – The Definition of the Term and the Development of the Political Map, *Southeastern Europe 1918-1995*, International Symposium, Dubrovnik, 1996, pp. 18-21).

tific and cultural links between Western and Southeast Europe have been interrupted for nearly ten years.

The international community exhausted its efforts trying to stop the conflict by utilizing many different mechanisms. The effect was considerably limited mostly because of differing national politics of key players involved in the region. Thus, the efforts towards stabilizing the Balkans were unilateral, since the incentives for stabilization and democratic development came mostly from outside the region. Internal efforts were rare and very often feeble. The international community's efforts usually proved more successful in certain regions when a regional partner—whose interests and goals did not differ from those of the international community—was involved. In global geo-strategic arrangements, the existence of such countries is essential in advancing stability and security. Particularly, if such countries are situated between two geopolitical regional wholes.

For many Western politicians and analysts, the results of the elections in the Republic of Croatia that took place on January 3, 2000 represented the best news to have come from the Balkans in the last ten years. The election results, which brought about a change in the national leadership and a new government, enhanced hopes for internal changes in the Balkans and created new opportunities for Croatia to actively contribute and participate in the implementation of international measures for bringing about regional stability. Croatia's cooperation with its neighbors, countries from the region and many countries outside the region may have been deemed satisfactory for the most part, but a partial or absolute barrier on cooperation regarding many specific, significant issues prevailed in its universal foreign policy activities. According to early announcements of the new government, the Republic of Croatia directed its foreign policy towards cooperation with all those that can contribute to its overall national development, as well as to the democratic progress and stabilization of the region. Its future initiatives aimed at stabilization and enhancing security in the region can be perceived based on its significance in global and regional geopolitical structures, its participation in the processes of the fragmentation of Southeastern Europe, and its geographical, cultural, religious, historical and geopolitical environment.

### *Global Geopolitical Structures*

Southeast Europe has always held a special place in global geopolitical terms. A significant portion of geopolitical analyses has focused on the hierarchically arranged organization of the area, as a precondition for maintaining balance and stability in the international system. The examination of relations between world powers was at the heart of the analyses. Thus, the ingredients of global geo-strategic relations often influenced the comprehensive observation of the world as a whole. In that context, there were certain areas whose importance was crucial in maintaining a global geo-strategic balance. These areas were said to be in a “strategic shadow”, because they did not have significant influence in relations between the major geo-strategic players. Through the process of de-colonization, a new arrangement of the area in the “strategic shadow” emerged, as well as other key geo-strategic areas, which influenced the creation of new, global geo-strategic perspectives. These views had to take into consideration the fact that there

were some parts which could not fall under the hierarchical order of the area at that time. For example, Saul Cohen in his division of the world highlights three independent areas: Southeast Asia, the Near East and Central and Eastern Europe, which is, today, an area undergoing a significant transition and the link between two geo-strategic areas.<sup>2</sup> This part of Europe represents the so-called “gateway” region. In other words, it’s a region that connects one distinct geo-strategic area to another. Both geo-strategic areas—the Euro-Atlantic maritime and the Eurasian land area—have considerable influence on the development of Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the development of the “gateway” region influences the development of the relations between the geo-strategic areas, as well as their individual, internal development. Cohen based his views on a long-existing conflict between the land and the sea, and he concluded that there are some areas that represent a “gateway” between the maritime and land regions.<sup>3</sup> The stability of these areas can contribute to the establishment of borders based on adaptability, complaisance and friendship.<sup>4</sup>

If we accept Cohen’s approach, then we can conclude that the borders between two geo-strategic areas were mainly unstable zones of conflict and dynamic geopolitical movements. One such region is the area described as Southeast Europe, where the hierarchical organization of the area has always fluctuated between uniting into greater areas and political wholes, and its fragmentation.

### *Fragmentation of Southeast Europe*

The breakup of socialistic Yugoslavia can be perceived as a conflict within a zone of instability in Southeast Europe. It has been interpreted on the basis of the stereotypes of natural and unavoidable Balkan conflicts with generations of hatreds at its core, which could not be clarified by the categories of Western political thought. During the cold war period, the area was a successful model of the “third way” with its own multicultural idyll in the geopolitical division of the world. The perception of the area as invariably complex and conflicting influenced the international community’s approach to ending and resolving the conflict. The term Balkans gained a negative connotation in the West as an area in which occurrence were developing completely opposite to those in Western Europe. A certain part of the former Yugoslavia can still be characterized as

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Saul B., *Geopolitics in the New World Era*, in: Demko, J. George, and Wood, William B., (eds.), *Reordering the World: Geopolitical Perspectives on the Twenty-first Century*, Westview Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 27-48.

<sup>3</sup> Characteristics of “gateway” regions can vary in certain details and mostly in their geographical factors. Within “gateway” regions, there are countries and other smaller regions, which geographically and politically belong to a broader region, but differ among each other in the level of political, economic, cultural and other aspects of development. Situated mostly along the border between the geo-strategic areas of the world and the geopolitical regions, the “gateway” countries have potentially sound preconditions for the development of effective economies, tourism and trade. They also have the favorable conditions necessary for the stimulation of establishing economic, social and political links. After achieving independence, they can contribute to the changes in their region from an unstable area to a stable and prosperous one.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Saul B., p. 39.

an area of instability, where many geo-strategic interests interact. The achievement of those interests is related to the overall stability of the region. As long as the region is unstable, certain individual strategic interests will take precedence, whereas if the region were stable, it would certainly indicate that common interests dominate in the area.

The democratization process in Southeast Europe is the only option in attempting to achieve comprehensive stability (economic, political and security) in the region. Even though the external incentives are important, internal factors are crucial since a successful democratic process requires internal, long-term sustainability. The result of democratization processes in Southeast Europe should be reflected by more flexible national policies, consisting of values and interests common to those of the international community. “Instant” democratization or democratic progress at the same intensity in the whole region can not be expected. Therefore, the areas, or rather, the countries in the region that are a leading example of the democratization process and are cooperating with the international community are of special importance. When a certain region lacks the necessary will for its democratization process, the progressive prosperity of those countries with a firm commitment to develop democracy will directly influence the future orientation of all other regional constituent elements (countries and its territorial areas). It is very important that such countries do not fall into a pitfall by establishing links with a single world power, but rather promote a policy of balanced relations with regional and world powers. Naturally, such a situation is not easily achieved. Nevertheless, an orientation of that nature should not be neglected. Should a country turn to one power base, it actually chooses to support a classical territorial division of the world, in which case the energy of emancipation is lost and so is the possibility of equal participation in the decision making process on the fate of the region.

In the geopolitical literature, Slovenia appears to represent a gateway country in Eastern and Southeast Europe.<sup>5</sup> Croatia shared a similar fate in its beginning stages as the country was being established, but its road was much more difficult. Croatia had to confront an armed and violent aggression, and later was faced with the consequences of an authoritarian regime. The Republic of Croatia’s political development and its relations with the international community represented a notable hurdle for the overall development of democracy in Southeast Europe. However, recent developments since the elections indicate the popular support for those political options that are opposed to armed conflicts and wars. The January 3, 2000 elections in the Republic of Croatia suggested to what extent its citizens desired political changes, particularly regarding policies such as association with Euro-Atlantic structures, developing good neighborly relations and fighting crime. In fact, these issues were at the core of the political program of the winning coalition of political parties.

### *The Republic of Croatia Surroundings*

The historical and geopolitical development of Croatia reveals that the key elements of its surroundings have a direct impact on its geopolitical behavior. In that regard, po-

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

litical constraints that are set in front of particular initiatives were historically an obstacle to balanced political and economic development.

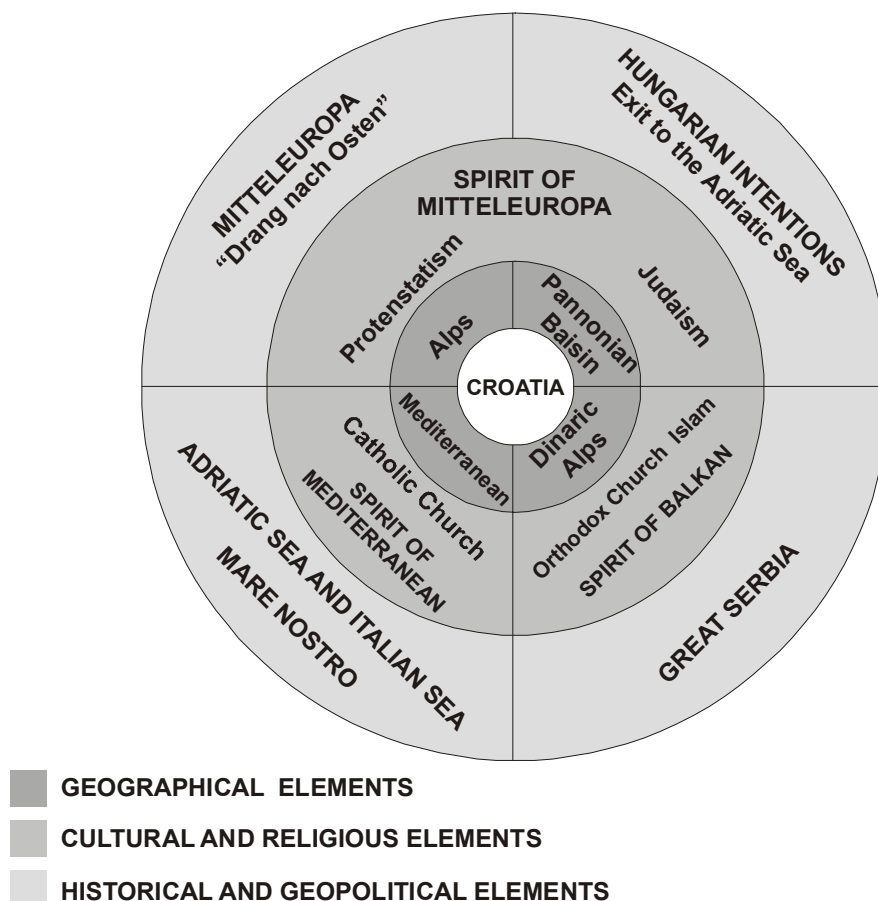
Croatia’s geopolitical position has always been rather complex because it has been determined by various ethnic, cultural, geographical and political factors. Another country with a similar geographical shape and positioning at an intersection of three distinct cultural and religious groups is difficult to find. The shape of its territory represents an unfavorable geopolitical characteristic, particularly since it cannot be changed, while contact with other cultural and civilization groups was often characterized by a spectrum of relations that ranged from conflict to cooperation. Its geographical, cultural, religious, historical and geopolitical surroundings directly influenced the historical and cultural development of Croatia. (See Picture 1)

Geographical surroundings – The Republic of Croatia has an extremely unusual territorial shape – almost like a “horseshoe”. This unfavorable shape of the country causes many difficulties, including infrastructure linkages<sup>6</sup> as well as geo-strategic concerns. Croatia is situated on Pannonian and Mediterranean areas with a major mountain link in between, that is, the so called mountain ridge with the transportation connections between Pannonian and Adriatic parts of Croatia. The unusual territorial shape of Croatia results in a, relatively speaking, long land border – altogether 2028 kilometers.<sup>7</sup> The politico-military control of such a long border is a particularly complex issue and a demanding responsibility. In that context, the relations of the country with its neighbors are of paramount importance. Croatia’s present situation is as follows. Around 46% of its international borders are shared with Bosnia-Herzegovina, where large multinational armed forces are located and whose future is still uncertain. About 41% of Croatia’s borders are with countries with which Croatia has friendly and cooperative relations (Slovenia, Hungary), while around 13% of the national borders are shared with Yugoslavia with which Croatia is in a process of normalizing its relations. The quality of inter-state relations significantly influences the geo-strategic sensitivity of international borders, and in Croatia’s case about 59% of its land borders are shared, in geopolitical terms, with unstable neighbors (Bosnia-Herzegovina and Yugoslavia). With the exception of Hungary and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia still has not resolved all the issue of its international borders with its other neighboring countries. In the areas of dispute, incidents are possible, even though a peaceful resolution of the problem is constantly emphasized. In addition, Republica Srpska (one of two entities of Bosnia-Herzegovina) did not support an agreement on the international borders between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina that was signed at the end of last July. Particular instances of open opposition to the agreement are publicly known (particularly the territories in the area of Kostajnica, the Kleka peninsula, the hinterland of Dubrovnik, etc.). In addition to the land border with neighboring countries, Croatia still has not resolved the issue of its flank

<sup>6</sup> For example, by air, the distance between Osijek and Dubrovnik is 320 kilometers. Correspondingly, the road connection on Croatia’s territory linking those two cities is about 1000 kilometers. The road distance between those two towns is shorter through two neighboring countries than through Croatia’s territory (around 580 km through Bosnia and around 750 km through Yugoslavia).

<sup>7</sup> For more details, see Žunec, Ozren (ed.), *Hrvatska vojska 2000: Nacionalna sigurnost, oružane snage i demokracija*, SDP and STRATA istraživanja, Zagreb, 1999, pp. 190-198.

international borders of its territorial waters. Zones of undefined or unclear boundaries can also be the cause of serious international conflicts (the issue of demarcating the borders in the Pirana Bay with Slovenia and the Boka Kotorska area with Yugoslavia, that is Montenegro).



Picture 1

Cultural and religious surroundings – Croatia is situated in a part of the south Slavic area of the Balkan Peninsula. Situated on the Peninsula’s west edge and crossing its western borders, Croatia also covers the biggest part of the east bank of the Adriatic. Throughout history, several major civilization centers developed in the broader surroundings of Croatian territories: Ancient Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Germanic, Venetian, Hungarian and Ottoman. Those centers greatly influenced the development of

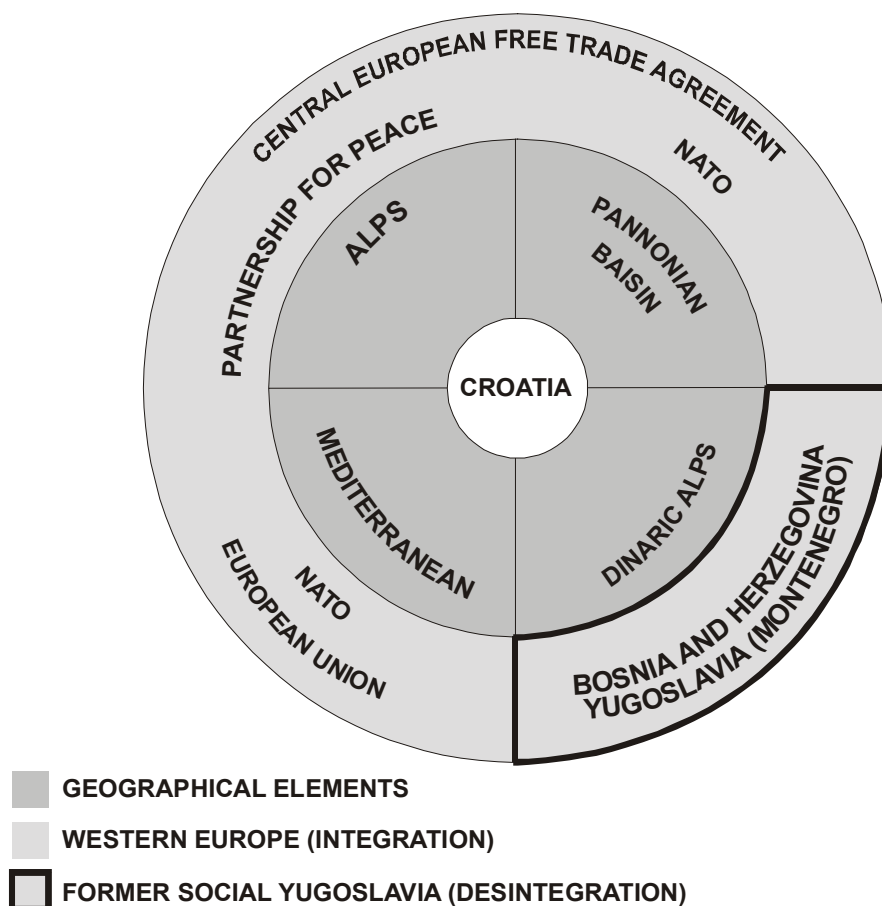
the entire Balkans region because it represented the area where they most often clashed. They also influenced the historical and cultural development of the nations that resided in the area. Three cultural and civilization groups directly influenced the development of Croatia: Mediterranean, Balkan and Central European. All three groups, in various periods of historical development, occupied and were present on much of the territory of today's Croatia, as many cultural monuments are testimony to their historical presence. While one of the groups dominated, the influence of another was repressed in which case it often resulted in conflicts. Historical periods in which all three groups were in a state of equilibrium were rare and short.

Historical and geopolitical surroundings – The direct path of the Ottoman Empire's advance on Europe was aimed across the area of the Balkans, and the same path was the general direction of Germanic interests' penetration towards the Southeast. Croatia and much of the broader area of the Balkans were in the sphere of Roman interests on the east bank of the Adriatic. Frequent migrations throughout history, mainly a result of Turkish military advances from the 14th to the 19th centuries, made the entire area unstable. Those events and the interaction of the various interests of great powers resulted in constant divisions of the area and between the nations. It also made their individual political genesis very slow and often impossible. After the First World War, some areas that, throughout history, belonged to various empires, states and historical wholes were joined in a state of the south Slavs. In spite of the Jalta agreements on the division of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia based on the “fifty-fifty” principle, it remained united after the Second World War, and a socialist-based country was established in its place. In the post-Second World War geopolitical division of Europe, Yugoslavia managed to remain united and independent until its breakup in 1991. Croatia is today independent country which was part of disintegration process of former Yugoslavia and part of instability zone of Southeast Europe (Croatia still has border with potential instability zone). (See Picture 2)

### *Six Geopolitical Initiatives*

In terms of its cultural and historical development, geographical location and regional geopolitical structure and in the common interest of peace and stability in Southeast Europe, the Republic of Croatia should face the developments of several geopolitical initiatives. In the last ten years, Croatia undertook some geopolitical initiatives that did not contribute to stability and security. Croatian relations with some of its neighbors were tense and at times unnecessarily hostile, mostly because cultural and historical differences were emphasized, as well as pessimism towards the processes of globalization and integration. Instead of the “always suspicious” approach to new ideas and mechanisms for developing democracy in Southeast Europe (characteristics of its past foreign policy), Croatia should explore new measures for strengthening its role in the regional stabilization processes. And certainly, there may be ample opportunities in its unique regional position, as a country situated on a major juncture of three significant European sub-regions. Isolationism and paranoia should finally cease to dominate foreign policy objectives. Relations of countries with world powers should play an important role in

national policies, but there needs to be a balanced approach to its overall international relations and not a single dominating bond.



Picture 2

As an active contribution to new relations, the Republic of Croatia should turn its efforts toward the development of regional relations through three initiatives: the Adriatic initiative (Slovenia and Montenegro), the Central European initiative (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and the Balkan initiative (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia). These three initiatives result from the geographical, cultural, religious, historical and geopolitical regional development of Croatia and



Southeast Europe. Regarding present global geopolitical structures, it is important to develop three more initiatives: European (EU, the Council of Europe, OSCE), Euro-Atlantic (United States, NATO) and global (UN, Russia, China).

A new Croatia could become an important cornerstone of stability on the Adriatic, in Central Europe and the Balkans. Taking a more prominent and constructive role, Croatia could help itself and, at the same time, its neighbors, and contribute to more coherent and successful NATO and EU policies toward these unstable and insecure parts of the continent. The democratic political transition must influence the changes in the national foreign policy of the new government. Since we all share a common future on the European continent, the changes in its foreign policy should primarily include the policy towards Bosnia-Herzegovina, Yugoslavia, Montenegro and other neighboring countries (Slovenia, Hungary and Italy), as well as relations with Western Europe. Naturally, it is not advisable to neglect relations with other countries that are not geographically situated on the European continent, but represent a significant factor in developments on the international scene (i.e., United States, Russia, China, etc.).

Croatian policy toward Bosnia should contain at least several key elements in order to be constructive and efficient. Unconditional respect of Bosnia-Herzegovina's territorial and administrative integrity at all political and diplomatic levels is necessary, including the development of normal political, economic and other relations with the neighboring country. Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a military threat to the Republic of Croatia and there is no reason for not developing normal and friendly relations.

Although, Croatia is not a member of NATO, it will soon join the Partnership for Peace program (PfP) and in that manner become a participant in concrete regional, security initiatives in two overlapping sub-regions (the Adriatic and Central Europe). First, the Adriatic partnership between Croatia and Italy could converge not only on mutual training and military cooperation, but also on the formation of multinational, regional rapid reaction forces designed to deal in crises situations. Other countries, like Slovenia, Austria, Hungary, Bosnia-Herzegovina, could also participate in such initiatives. For example, such multinational units could be trained on Croatian territory in Dalmatia or Slavonia. They could train for humanitarian operations and emergency situations (i.e., search and rescue), and ecological or other catastrophes in the region. Similar initiatives can be extended to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and even Montenegro and Serbia, depending on their individual, internal political development processes. Those would be the incentives for the development of the Balkan initiatives. The sub-regional initiatives of that kind would notably contribute to the development of Euro-Atlantic and regional alliances based on constructive and stabilizing guidance. The Republic of Croatia can generate significant incentives for regional changes, mutually supportive of and parallel with the activities of development efforts by the European, Euro-Atlantic and global initiatives.

### *Conclusion*

The Republic of Croatia is, by its geographical positioning, defined as an area that cannot be bypassed while attempting to connect the North, West, East and Southeast of

Europe. The war in the former Yugoslavia and the consequential events had a distinctive influence on the formulation of national policies of all those that played a role in the Balkans. Croatia's national policy, although declaratively directed towards democratization and cooperation with the West, was not consistent with its own declarations on many major issues. Thus, it could not initiate or accomplish geopolitical initiatives, which would be supported by the international community's efforts to contribute to Balkan security and stability. The political will of the newly elected Republic of Croatia government for cooperation with the international community becomes a cornerstone for the development of new relations in Southeast Europe. The international community has a key role to play in stimulating the development of such structures that will not represent a security challenge to any large or small country in the region. Therefore, it is important which mechanisms will be applied for the stabilization and development of the region.

Regarding its geographical position and its foreign policy orientation, the Republic of Croatia can become a stable and indispensable partner in the implementation of democratic initiatives in the area of Southeast Europe. Its success is directly connected to the parallel development of six geopolitical initiatives. The Adriatic, Central European, Balkans, European, Euro-Atlantic and global initiatives should, with the continued efforts of the international community, indicate that the political development of the region is headed in the direction of long-term stability and security.