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THE BALKAN NEUTRAL BLOCK IN 1939. A BRITISH INITIATIVE, A PROJECT OF ALL (Summary)

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The plan of forming a so-called Balkan Neutral Block can be considered an important landmark of the analysis of the Great Britain policy in relation with South-East Europe before and at the beginning of Second World War. The mission of Balkan Neutral Block was supposed to oppose the expansionist tendencies of Germany or, eventually, of the Soviet Union in 1939.

However, we have to emphasize the existence of some British, Romanian and Italian plans that aimed at „forming” the Balkan Neutral Block in 1939, but a deeper and more extensive analysis, first of the British documents of 1939, can lead to a significant change of perspective. Most often, the historian’s attention was focused on the initiatives started immediately after the outbreak of war in Europe, on 1st of September 1939. Nevertheless, the idea of the Block seemed to be entirely of British origin and it appeared even earlier, at the beginning of April 1939. More than that, even after the outbreak of the Second World War, it seemed that London was, more or less discretely, behind the majority of the Balkan or even the Italian of forming such a political and security body to which we have referred.

Obviously, even before the outbreak of war, both Great Britain and France were interested in keeping away the main German military forces from the Western front and, in the same time, to use the Balkan countries armies to strike the balance, at least from the numerical point of view, in the favor of the Allies. In such conditions, while Germany did not attack the South-East countries, the governments of Great Britain and France agreed that their interests would have been served by a Block of the Balkan States ready to resist to a German aggression. As mentioned before, that was not a new idea. The British took into consideration the possibility of such political equation immediately after the events on 7th of April 1939, when the Italian troops occupied Albania, the country that, on 14th of April would be included in the Italian state by King Victor Emmanuel under a form of a personal union.

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In any case, at the outbreak of the war, the British were convinced that the necessary actions in this direction were meant to avoid the Italian provocation. In this case, London tried to maintain the peace and unity in the Balkan region and not necessarily repeat the scenario of the First World War and of the Ally intervention of that time, with the unshipping of Salonic.

In this context, the treaty concluded among Turkey, France and Great Britain in autumn 1939 stirred an increasing interest on the part of Balkan states regarding the plan of forming a neutral block in the region. Even the Romanian government followed with great interest the tripartite treaty between Turkey and the Great Western Powers, considering it an instrument which Paris and London could use to contribute to consolidate the security in the Balkan area and they could also threat the German influence in the region. From Romanian authorities' point of view this alliance opened up the possibility of the Western influence in the South-East Europe to become stronger. This alliance could also develop the relations among the member states of the Balkan Agreement and an eventual Balkan front could become more powerful.

The idea of a Balkan Block of Neutral States did not take roots only in Great Britain, France or Romania. On 15th of September 1939, Mussolini showed interest in the formation of Balkan and Danube States Block, under the Italian patronage, of course. More than that, the Italian project was supported by Berlin. However, the conclusion of the tripartite treaty between Great Britain, France and Turkey determined Italy to abandon the project, feeling unpleased and embarrassed by the prestige that Turkey gained, and despite the assurances of the British that supported the agreement was not set against Italy.

The entire project eventually failed because of Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary refusals – that came up after the pressure of Berlin – to join such a political body. In case of Italy, at least, it seems there was a warning of Ribbentrop, according to which, in case the Soviet Union would have moved towards Balkans, the German troops would intervene in order to defend the interests of the *Reich* in Romania. Due to these conditions, at its turn, Italy should have to advance and occupy the regions it claimed in Yugoslavia. In the conditions of a united front of the Balkan states and the perspectives of their collaboration with Great Britain and France, Italy implied the risk of being defeated in the Balkans or even on its own territory. For these reasons, Italy chose to compromise adopting a passive attitude, both for gaining time and for keeping the contact with Western powers and Berlin. But this tactics was responsible for not allowing Italian authorities effectively involve in the Neutral Balkan Block project.