

# Kosovo: America’s “NATO State” in the Balkans?

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## Introduction

Leading Serbian politicians accuse the United States of seeking to create a “NATO state” in Kosovo.<sup>2</sup> Although not as intended, this provocative formulation concisely captures the twin essential features of U.S. policy – to midwife Kosovo’s establishment as a state and to rely on NATO as its principal instrument to make that process a success.

Significant progress has been made toward these objectives, but it remains incomplete and vulnerable to setbacks. Lingering disunity within the alliance, competition for attention and resources, and the approaching U.S. presidential transition all present potential obstacles to success. Moreover, while American diplomats understand it’s too soon to switch to “autopilot” on Kosovo,<sup>3</sup> they now need assistance from partners in Europe to keep their own country’s policy on track.

## Goals and Objectives

Critics in Serbia and elsewhere ascribe American support for Kosovo’s independence to designs for a pliable client state in the region. Alleged motives include desire for permanent presence at the U.S. Army’s Camp

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the remarks of Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica on March 23, 2008, quoted on the website of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; [http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Policy/CI/KIM/240308\\_1\\_e.html](http://www.mfa.gov.yu/Policy/CI/KIM/240308_1_e.html).

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee March 4, 2008.

Bondsteel (“Kosovo’s real capital”<sup>4</sup>), control over future pipeline routes, and an additional European missile defence site. One barbed jest suggests the Bush administration recognized Kosovo to ensure one foreign country remained pro-American.

Some of these perceptions contain grains of truth. The prevailing gratitude and goodwill toward all things American among Kosovo’s population, especially the ethnic Albanian majority, contrast sharply with more critical attitudes elsewhere. Likewise, the U.S. military’s European Command has openly stated interest in new operating locations south and east of its Cold War hubs.

Nonetheless, conspiratorial explanations exaggerate Kosovo’s direct strategic value. Even were its leaders the most willing puppets, the country would still be one of the smallest and poorest in Europe. Geographically, it adds little to the “shared facilities” already available to America’s armed forces in nearby Romania and Bulgaria.

Though perhaps less exciting, per the official line America’s overarching goal is advancing long-term regional stability.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, Kosovo’s statehood represents both a natural outcome of the 1990s crisis and a necessary if not sufficient next step for Southeast Europe’s democratic integration.

Like the United Nation’s 2005 Eide report, U.S. policy turns the usual counter-arguments against Kosovo’s viability on their head. Rather than representing disqualifiers, the territory’s oft-cited social and economic problems (a weak economic base, rudimentary infrastructure, negligible

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<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Koštunica’s spokesman Branislav Ristivojević, quoted in Umberto Pascali, “Kosovo: Toward the End of the Experiment?” *Global Research*, Sept. 25, 2007; <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=6900>.

<sup>5</sup> See John Erath, “The Kosovo Status – Key to Balkan Stability”, in *Approaching or Avoiding Cooperative Security – The Western Balkans in the Aftermath of the Kosovo Settlement Proposal and the Riga Summit*, Study Group on Regional Stability in Southeast Europe of the Partnership for Peace Consortium (Sept. 2007), pp.93-96.

investment, astronomical unemployment, minority isolation, widespread corruption and organized crime) evidence the need for the political-legal clarity and sense of ownership best offered by statehood. Neither return to Serbian administration, even with wide autonomy, nor indefinite perpetuation of the territory's ambiguous post-1999 status is viewed as offering a realistic alternative. Further delay in accepting these conclusions would only deepen local frustration and international fatigue.

U.S. officials also believe that supporting rather than resisting Kosovo's independence preserves their credibility and leverage to influence the process in positive directions. In particular it helped persuade Kosovo's leaders to coordinate the timing of their declaration and to accept the March 2007 Ahtisaari proposal for continued international supervision, decentralized governance, and minority protections as the guiding framework for their new state.

Taking the Kosovo question off the table is also seen as helping the broader region move beyond its contentious past. Unpopular as Kosovo's independence would be for Serbia, it would eventually stop claims to the territory from overshadowing and distorting all other developments there. Likewise, as long as Kosovo was neither partitioned nor merged into a Greater Albania, *sui generis* resolution of its status could advance inter-communal integration in countries such as Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

To the extent ulterior motives play a role, these developments are also intended to support America's global strategic interests. Meeting the aspirations of the predominantly Muslim people of Kosovo would show the War on Terror was no anti-Islamic crusade. Helping democratic good governance take root in these countries would marginalize extremist ideologies within them and beyond. Finally, eventual normalization of the new status quo would allow further reduction and redirection of U.S. troop commitments in the region.

## **The NATO Toolbox**

Critique of NATO decision-making regarding Yugoslavia, especially 1999s Operation Allied Force, figured largely in the Bush administration's early preference for more flexible coalitions of the willing. Nonetheless, its more recent efforts on Kosovo have relied heavily on NATO as an instrument of choice.

### **KFOR**

The alliance's most direct contribution are the nearly 16 000 KFOR (Kosovo Force) peacekeeping troops remaining on the ground. Under UN Resolution 1244, KFOR retains overall responsibility for security in Kosovo. NATO's November 2006 Riga and April 2008 Bucharest summits reiterated commitment to that role. Unlike some UN missions that require periodic reauthorization, KFOR's mandate extends indefinitely until the Security Council votes to end it.

KFOR's task presumes sufficient capability to deter or react to any major acts of violence. In wake of its difficulties dispersing ethnic Albanian mobs in March 2004, the alliance reorganized sectoral boundaries, improved intelligence sharing, and reduced restrictive caveats on employment of national contingents.

KFOR's other key role has been working with Kosovo's authorities to train indigenous defence forces. Since 1999 this has meant the Kosovo Protection Corps, fighters from the old Kosovo Liberation Army refashioned as a civil defence force. The KPC still commands considerable prestige among Kosovar Albanians, so NATO has worked with sensitivity in preparing to replace it with a smaller, post-independence Kosovo Security Force.

## **Recognition**

A second desired contribution from NATO is a united front on recognition of Kosovo's statehood. Alliance unanimity in 1999 was taken to bolster the legitimacy of its intervention without a UN mandate. Nine years later diplomatic relations would be extended individually, but a clear consensus within this prominent body of democracies would likewise reinforce the accepted nature of the step and encourage other countries to follow suit. Agreement on Kosovo's new status would also greatly aid decisions on KFOR operations and offering Partnership for Peace or other formal ties.

## **Enlargement**

The third element the U.S. has sought to harness for Kosovo's success is NATO's enlargement process. Alliance "encirclement" of Serbia and Kosovo would help stabilize key neighbours and present a buffer against any negative spill over from independence. Over the longer term, it would also showcase integration's positive advantages for both states.

Accordingly, the Bush administration pushed hard for formal membership invitations to all three "Adriatic Charter" countries at the Bucharest summit. The case of Croatia was uncontroversial, but other member governments as well as independent experts doubted the readiness of Albania and Macedonia.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the administration supported the offer of "Intensified Dialogue" to the "New 3" states (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia) that had joined Partnership for Peace after the Riga summit.

## **Obstacles**

Despite significant achievements, America's NATO-based policy for Kosovo remains beset by shortcomings.

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Asmus, "A Better Way to Grow NATO" *Washington Post*, Jan. 28, 2008.

## **Allied Divisions**

Persistent disunity within NATO has been the first stumbling block. On 21 May the Czech Republic became the twenty-first alliance member to recognize Kosovo. Though constituting half of the total states to have taken that step, it still left five other NATO countries (Greece, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) unwilling to do so. Even in reliably Atlanticist Romania, President Traian Basescu condemned Kosovo's "illegal" declaration and a joint session of parliament voted 357-27 against recognition. Internal divisions and threatened Serbian sanctions have also inhibited regional NATO partners Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Montenegro from formalizing ties with their new neighbour.

The U.S. would prefer more solid agreement, but there are silver linings to having a few holdouts. First, the displays of policy independence rebut sceptics' claim that joining NATO equals submission to American domination. This could boost support for the alliance in both current and prospective members. Second, the stance of traditional "friends" such as Romania and Greece has helped maintain NATO links with Serbia. It has also lent credence to arguments there that the national claim over Kosovo is better defended through Euro-Atlantic engagement rather than self-isolation.

There were fewer upsides to Greece's veto of Macedonian membership at Bucharest. Though the concerns for Macedonia's and Albania's preparation were successfully set aside, the former's long-running dispute with Greece over its official name proved insurmountable. The most allies could salvage was agreement to issue an invitation once that issue is resolved. As a further interim measure, the U.S. signed a bilateral "strategic partnership" agreement with Macedonia in early May.

## **Resource Scarcity**

Unlike in the late 1990s, Kosovo is now a secondary issue for both America and NATO. Some indirect links to global counter-terrorism have been noted, but Iraq remains the "central front" of U.S. efforts.

Similarly for NATO as a whole, the Bucharest summit reemphasized the Afghanistan ISAF mission as “top priority”.

The combined demands of those two conflicts constrain the attention and resources leftover for Kosovo. In fall 2007, U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates even threatened to pull the remaining 1 600 U.S. troops out of KFOR if other allies didn’t increase deployments to ISAF.<sup>7</sup> This year countries such as Great Britain and Italy have sent several hundred extra troops on short-term deployments to Kosovo. However, compared even to March 2004, when the alliance was able to rush in over 2 000 emergency reinforcements, the pool of readily available reserves is considerably less deep.<sup>8</sup>

To some extent again the U.S. and NATO have tried to make a virtue of necessity. Existing forces have thus far managed to prevent recurrence of the post-declaration attacks on border posts and government buildings in the north of Kosovo. However, KFOR has not impeded ethnic Serb communities from maintaining unsanctioned links with Belgrade, including by voting in Serbia’s May parliamentary and municipal elections against the objections of UNMIK (UN Mission in Kosovo). At least for the time being, toleration within limits of a de facto, soft partition of the Serb-majority North from the rest of Kosovo seems the accepted price for avoiding confrontations that might prove difficult to contain.

## **Presidential Transition**

The U.S. political calendar presents a final distraction. With elections in November, the Bucharest summit represented the Bush administration’s last major push on European issues. Increasingly limited by lame-duck status, it seems set to devote most of its time left in office to the Middle East.

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<sup>7</sup> “U.S. Pins Kosovo Force on NATO’s Afghan Commitment,” *Reuters*, October 21, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Sean Rayment, “UK’s Last 1 000 Soldiers Rushed Out to the Balkans,” *London Sunday Telegraph*, Feb. 17, 2008.

Meanwhile, Kosovo has been nearly invisible in the campaigns of Bush's would-be successors. The two presumed major party nominees, John McCain and Barack Obama, issued general statements in February supporting its recognition. However, Hillary Clinton's withdrawal will remove the candidate with senior advisors most personally attuned to new developments in the Balkans; former U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke and NATO military commander Wesley Clark.

The eventual election outcome aside, changes of administration inevitably create extended vacancies in key national security posts. Resulting gaps in development of detailed knowledge and working relationships are only partly filled by continuity among career professionals. Transitions to opposite party administration may be especially contentious, but intra-party turnovers are also subject to disjuncture.<sup>9</sup>

Taking these factors together, new top-level U.S. initiatives on Kosovo are unlikely for the next year or more.

## **Conclusion**

The first months of Kosovo's declared independence provide grounds for satisfaction with U.S. support via NATO. Violence and unrest have been less than commonly feared. Contra predictions of anti-Western backlash, Serbian voters increased their support for President Boris Tadić's "European Serbia" coalition at the expense of more strident rivals. Kosovo's political authorities proved able to pass the needed raft of legislation for their new state's constitution to come into force in June.

However, Kosovo as a "NATO state" is a transitional strategy rather than a long-term goal. As such, its success is threatened from two sides.

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<sup>9</sup> For a brief statement of the general problem, see Richard Armitage and Michele Flournoy, "No Time for 'Nobody Home'," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2008. For comments on the transition from the Reagan to the Bush Senior foreign policy teams, see Robert Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider's Account of U.S. Policy in Europe 1989-1992*. Washington: Woodrow Wilson Press, 1997.



First, incomplete achievement of American objectives for NATO has weakened the alliance's envisioned stabilizing function. Second, that interim role was intended to pave the way for the European Union and its EULEX rule of law mission to pick up the broader tasks of assisting development and civilian institution-building. Postponement of EULEX's deployment due to uncertainty of its legal status threatens to create a vacuum uneasily filled by either NATO or the residual UNMIK presence, just as high-level American focus turns away to other matters. The longer delay becomes, the greater the danger of renewed stalemate (or worse) across the region will be.

A significant U.S. and NATO presence will be needed in Kosovo for several years to come. However, the most important next steps by the international community, from a way ahead for EULEX to resolution of the Macedonian name dispute, must come from European members of NATO and the EU. The fate of U.S. policy now largely rests with them.

German diplomat Wolfgang Ischinger, EU representative to the final Troika talks on Kosovo status in fall 2007, recently called on Europe to be a proactive partner for the next U.S. President.<sup>10</sup> Moving ahead on Kosovo as an "EU state" would be a good place to start.

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<sup>10</sup> "Europe has much to Offer the White House", *Financial Times*, May 4, 2008.