

The End of the Balkan Interlude?

By Ted Galen Carpenter

Unlike the 1990s, when the turmoil from the breakup of Yugoslavia dominated the security agenda of the United States and its NATO allies, subsequent years have been relatively quiet. The civil war in Bosnia has not flared up since the conclusion of the Dayton Accords in late 1995. Albania, which teetered on the brink of civil war in the mid-1990s, has not seen a repetition of that instability following the temporary introduction of a stabilization force led by Greece and Italy. The Kosovo controversy culminated with NATO's intense bombing campaign of Serbia in 1999 to compel Belgrade to relinquish control over the province to an international occupation. Instability in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in late 2000 and early 2001, which threatened to become another Balkan crisis, soon subsided. Slobodan Milosevic's fall from power in October 2000 led to the emergence of a democratic Serbia, and the gradual erosion of that country's status as the pariah of Europe.

The reduction in turbulence has been greeted with relief in Washington. That is understandable, because the United States has had far more pressing security matters on its agenda since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The last thing U.S. policymakers wanted to deal with, given the requirements of the war against radical Islamic terrorism and the debacle of the Iraq war, were additional security problems in the Balkans.

But the recent quiescence of the Balkans is somewhat deceptive. Beneath the apparent stability, serious problems still fester. Moreover, some of the policies now being pushed by

Washington and allied capitals threaten to re-ignite many of those controversies. There is a very real possibility that the interlude in Balkan troubles that the United States and the members of the European Union have enjoyed is about to come to an end. If that occurs, it will have significant implications for both America and the EU countries. It may have an especially adverse impact on Greece, since Greek firms have become very large investors in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Those investments are based on the assumption that the relative stability of recent years will continue. A change in that security environment would have serious and ugly economic ramifications for Greece.ⁱ

The most prominent development that could bring the period of relative stability to an end is the effort to establish a final political status for Kosovo. Although the UN resolution authorizing international governance of the province following NATO's air assault ostensibly recognized that Kosovo remained part of Serbia, only the most naive observers doubted that the province would ultimately be granted independence. That suspicion was borne out earlier this year when UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari recommended "conditional" or "supervised" independence, disregarding Serbia's offer to give Kosovo extensive autonomy within the Serbian state.ⁱⁱ

Belgrade immediately cried "foul," and for understandable reasons. Not only did the Ahtisaari plan envision the forcible dismemberment of a UN member state by international edict, it proposed the dismemberment of a *democratic* state. Russia has strongly supported Serbia's protests, threatening to veto a resolution on independence if it is put before the UN Security Council.ⁱⁱⁱ The United States and the leading powers in the European Union have, in turn,

threatened to bypass the Security Council and grant Kosovo independence without UN approval.^{iv} That threat is reminiscent of NATO's actions in 1999, when it became clear that Russia would veto a resolution authorizing the use of force against Serbia over the Kosovo issue. Washington and its allies simply did an end run around the Security Council and waged war on NATO's supposed authority as a regional security organization.

Granting Kosovo independence entails significant ramifications even if it receives Security Council approval. The measure sets a worrisome precedent in an international system with an abundance of regional secessionist movements.^v Indeed, Russia could one day cite such a decision as a precedent for dismembering neighboring Georgia by recognizing the independence of that country's Abkhazian or South Ossetian regions. Or it could use it as justification some day to wrench the Russian-speaking Crimea away from neighboring Ukraine.

But as troubling as granting Kosovo independence under UN auspices might be, doing it over the objections of Moscow and Belgrade entails the risk of even more serious consequences. At the very least, it would poison Serbia's relations with both the United States and the European Union. That development would hardly promote stability in the Balkans. Although both Washington and the leading EU capitals have held out the carrot of more rapid Serbian integration into NATO and the EU if Belgrade ends its objections to an independent Kosovo, Serbian officials have strongly signaled that they are not interested in such a deal.^{vi}

If they value political survival, they have little choice but to take that stance. Attempting to appease the United States and the EU powers would produce an extremely negative domestic reaction. The ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party was already the strongest party in the

country's recent legislative elections, and only a coalition of more moderate parties kept the Radicals out of power.^{vii} Failing to resist the amputation of Kosovo, which most Serbs regard as the cradle of their civilization, would likely lead to a surge of support for the Radical Party—a development that Washington and its allies would regard as anathema.

Granting Kosovo independence also is likely to lead to an increase in abuses against the remaining non-Albanian inhabitants there. During the 1999 war and its aftermath, more than 240,000 people (mostly Serbs, but also including Roma, Bulgarians, Jews and other groups) were driven from the province. That large-scale ethnic cleansing campaign occurred on NATO's watch, and the alliance did nothing to halt it, much less reverse the effects. Those refugees are still waiting to go home, even though there is little prospect that they will ever be allowed to do so. In addition to the initial campaign of ethnic cleansing, the Kosovar government and its supporters have ignored (if not actually fomented) acts of violence against the remaining non-Albanian inhabitants as well presided over the systematic destruction of Christian churches and Serbian historical sites. Again, NATO's response to these depredations has been anemic at best.^{viii}

Any measure granting Kosovo independence will undoubtedly contain language proclaiming respect for the rights of ethnic minorities and will try to maintain the fiction that Kosovo is a multi-ethnic state. But such language will be little more than meaningless verbiage to sooth the consciences of Western policymakers. The stark reality is that, if there is no partition of Kosovo that leaves predominantly Serb portions under Belgrade's jurisdiction and protection, it will simply be a matter of time until virtually all non-Albanian residents are driven from the

province.^{ix} If NATO has been unwilling or unable to prevent such ethnic cleansing while occupying Kosovo with thousands of troops, it is certainly going to be incapable of preventing further atrocities once those forces are withdrawn. Language about “conditional” or “supervised” independence, is merely face-saving diplomatic rhetoric. Within a few years, Kosovo’s independence will be unconditional and unsupervised. And given Pristina’s track record, there is little realistic reason to expect that non-Albanian inhabitants will be treated with even a modicum of decency once NATO leaves.^x

Nor is that the extent of the problems that an independent Kosovo will produce. There is scant evidence that advocates of a “Greater Albania” have relinquished their territorial claims in the Balkans. Indeed, within months of the NATO-orchestrated Kosovar victory in 1999, Albanian populations in neighboring FYROM waged a low-grade insurgency.^{xi} Under intense Western pressure, the government in Skopje made a variety of concessions to grant predominantly Albanian areas greater autonomy. That settlement is unlikely to hold. Moreover, there has also been agitation in largely Albanian regions elsewhere in Serbia as well as in Montenegro. Greater Albania advocates in both Kosovo and Albania even cast covetous eyes toward Epirus, a region in northwestern Greece. Western policymakers who believe that settling Kosovo’s final political status will lead to an end to irredentist Albanian claims elsewhere in the Balkans are likely to be disappointed. It will more likely lead to the next stage of turbulence.

Aside from the political ramifications, an independent Kosovo is likely to intensify some already worrisome trends. Even under international occupation, Kosovo has become a nexus for organized crime in Europe.^{xii} Indeed, Kosovo (along with neighboring Albania) has emerged as

the principal center for both drug trafficking and prostitution.^{xiii} There is also the matter of penetration by radical Islamic elements. Revelations that several members of the terrorist cell that planned attacks against Fort Dix were immigrants from Kosovo may merely be a harbinger of a much more pervasive danger.^{xiv} Again, if these problems have already reached severe levels despite a measure of international supervision, one can only speculate how bad they might become once international supervision disappears.

Although U.S. and EU policy regarding Kosovo is the main factor threatening to bring the Balkan interlude to an end, it is not the only one. Western tinkering with the Dayton Accords regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina also threatens to destabilize a very delicate arrangement.

Bosnia under the Dayton system has hardly been a smashing success. It is still a country that lacks a meaningful sense of nationhood or even the basic political cohesion to be an effective state. The reality is that, if secession were allowed, the overwhelming majority of Bosnian Serbs would vote to detach their self-governing region (the Republika Srpska) from Bosnia and form an independent country or merge with Serbia.^{xv} Most Croats would also choose to secede and join with Croatia. Bosnian Muslims constitute the only faction that wishes to maintain Bosnia-Herzegovina in its current incarnation.

Political paralysis has plagued Bosnia in the years since the Dayton Accords were signed. To the extent that political power has been exercised by the country's inhabitants at all, it has been at the subnational level, i.e., the Republika Srpska and the Muslim-Croat federation. The national government has been weak to the point of impotence. Most real political power has been exercised by the UN High Representative, an international potentate who has ruled like a

colonial governor.^{xvi} High Representatives have routinely removed elected officials from office, disqualified candidates for elections, and imposed various policies by decree.

The economic situation has not been much better. Bosnia's economy is still a basket case more than a decade after Dayton. Indeed, without the inputs from international aid agencies and the spending by the swarms of international bureaucrats in the country (which account for more than a third of the country's gross domestic product), Bosnia would scarcely have a functioning economy at all. Nor has the degree of economic freedom and the rule of law developed significantly. The latest global survey of economic freedom by the Heritage Foundation and the *Wall Street Journal* ranked Bosnia 115th out of 157 countries in the survey--right between those enlightened liberal economic models Benin and Ethiopia.^{xvii}

Yet despite the political and economic failures, the Dayton Accords did end the Bosnian civil war, and the country has maintained a peaceful course for nearly 12 years. That achievement has occurred because Dayton established a fragile equilibrium. The Bosnian Serbs have had a sufficient degree of self government (albeit having to tolerate the heavy-handed policies of the High Representative) that it did not seem worthwhile to resume the fighting. Bosnian Muslims were satisfied with the fiction of a united state and a disproportionate share of the economic spoils from the international occupation to refrain from trying to extend their authority over the Republika Srpska.

But Western officials seemingly are unwilling to leave well enough alone. The reality that Bosnia was (and is) more a pretend country than a real, viable country has always grated on them. In recent years, they have pushed a campaign to invest Bosnia's weak central government

with greater powers—to make it a true, effective national government.^{xviii} That is a very dangerous venture. It threatens to upset the delicate political equilibrium that has existed since Dayton.^{xix} In particular, the Serbs are increasingly nervous that they may lose much of the self-government that they have enjoyed, and that they might again have to face the prospect of domination by their Muslim adversaries. Let’s remember that it was the fear of Muslim subjugation that led the Serb minority to make their initial bid for secession in the early 1990s. Even if the worst-case scenario does not emerge (a renewal of the Bosnian civil war), efforts to strengthen the central government are likely to boost Muslim assertiveness and reignite Serb fears. At the very least, that portends an increase in tensions in Bosnia and put additional strains on the still insecure democracies in Serbia and Croatia, which would come under pressure to defend the interests of their ethnic compatriots across the border.

A final Western policy that threatens to end the Balkan interlude is the growing reluctance to expand the European Union. A prominent “carrot” that EU leaders held out to the feuding factions in the former Yugoslavia was membership in the broader European community—if they would choose the path of peace. According to that logic, national borders—and nationalism itself—would become progressively less important in the “new Europe.” Ethnic, religious, and nationalist disputes would fade as the benefits of participation in a united Europe became apparent. Such violent episodes would become shameful historical relics.^{xx}

But that argument was based on the twin assumptions (and the implicit promise) that EU expansion would be broad and relatively rapid. Those assumptions are now increasingly dubious. There is growing opposition among the existing EU members to further enlargement in

the near term. Indeed, some European leaders have argued that the latest round of expansion should be the last one for the foreseeable future.^{xxi} Although opposition is strongest to Turkey's possible membership, the reluctance is broader than that. There are concerns that some of the most recent members in Central and Eastern Europe were not really ready, economically or politically, for membership, and that the next round of prospective candidates (especially in the former Yugoslavia) are even less qualified.

In addition, the members of the European Union have encountered great difficulties in agreeing to a new constitution for the bloc. Until that matter is resolved--and the agreement finally reached in late June 2007 looks extremely fragile since it is already coming under sharp criticism from Italy and other countries--expansion is almost a moot point.

Difficulties with regard to EU expansion are not merely an abstract concern. If it becomes clear to the various factions in the former Yugoslavia that membership in the EU is not forthcoming anytime soon, that significantly reduces a crucial incentive to mute their disputes. Quarrels over territory and political power could again surge to the surface.

All of these factors combine to make the end of the Balkan interlude more than a remote possibility. The key question for American policymakers is whether they will allow the United States to be drawn into any new round of turmoil, or whether they will take the position that such matters are purely Europe's responsibility. In the 1990s, the United States seized the initiative from the EU members and led the Western response to the conflicts in the Balkans. But on that occasion, the United States did not have major security problems of its own. America does not have that luxury this time. In all likelihood, Washington will off load responsibility for

Balkan issues to its European allies. One can only hope that they will respond with better policies than the United States has foisted on the region.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of seven books and the editor of ten books on international affairs, including

NATO's Empty Victory: A Postmortem on the Balkan War.

Notes

-
- i. Andrew Borowiec, "Athens Fears Spread of Balkans Turmoil," *Washington Times*, July 3, 2006.
 - ii. Colum Lynch, "UN Mediator Calls for Kosovo Independence," *Washington Post*, March 21, 2007.
 - iii. Katarina Subasic, "UN Kosovo Plan 'Failed,' New Negotiations Needed: Russia," Agence France Presse, April 19, 2007.
 - iv. Paul Taylor, "Kosovo to be Independent With or Without the UN: U.S.," Reuters, April 28, 2007; and "U.S. To Sidestep Russia Veto on Kosovo," *The Australian*, June 12, 2007. The offer by the Western powers in mid-June to delay a final decision for four months to give time for further negotiations is not likely to alter the outcome. That gesture seems more designed to give Russia some diplomatic cover if Moscow decides to retreat from its threat to veto a Security

Council resolution.

- v. Proponents of independence, of course, deny that it sets a precedent. Perhaps the boldest (and most absurd) example of that argument comes from former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations (and long-time Albanian partisan) Richard Holbrooke. He asserts flatly that “Kosovo is a unique case and sets no precedent for separatist movements elsewhere” Richard Holbrooke, “Russia’s Test in Kosovo,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2007. For a different view, see Stanley Kober, “Europe’s Approaching Train Wreck,” *International Herald Tribune*, March 22, 2007.
- vi. Douglas Hamilton, “Serbia Says It Won’t Trade Kosovo for EU or NATO,” Reuters, June 12, 2007.
- vii. David Vujanovic, “Ultra-Nationalist Win Clouds Serbia’s Future,” Agence France Presse, January 22, 2007; and Strategic Forecasting, Inc., “Serbia: The New Government’s Precarious Position,” Global Intelligence Brief, May 16, 2007.
- viii. Doug Bandow, “A Separate Peace?” *National Interest Online*, September 27, 2006.
- ix. For an argument that partition would at least limit the extent of ethnic cleansing, see Timothy William Peters, “A Separate Peace,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2007.
- x. Matt Robinson, “UN Braced for Serb Exodus from Kosovo: Report,” Reuters, May 31, 2007; and Doug Bandow, “Blind Eyes Over Kosovo,” *American Spectator*, July 20, 2006.
- xi. For a discussion of that episode, see Ted Galen Carpenter, “Waist Deep in the Balkans and Sinking: Washington Confronts the Crisis in Macedonia,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 397, April 30, 2001.
- xii. Tom Walker, “Rampage of the Mafia May Delay Kosovo Independence,” *Times* (London), April 9, 2006.
- xiii. Curiously, though, neither Kosovo nor Albania was given “tier 3” status (the worst level) in the State Department’s latest report on human trafficking, even though several countries with less egregious records were put in that category. “U.S. Blacklist on Human Trafficking Grows,” Associated Press, June 12, 2007.
- xiv. Jerry Seper, “6 Held in Plot to Hit Fort Dix,” *Washington Times*, May 9, 2007. The problem of radical Islamic penetration may be even more severe in Bosnia. Isabel Vincent, “Terrorist Plans Seized in Bosnia,” *National Post*, March 21, 2002; Sherrie Gossett, “Jihadists

Find Convenient Base in Bosnia,” *Cybercast News Service*, August 17, 2005; and Daria Sito-Sucic, “Bosnia’s Muslims Divided Over Inroads of Wahhabism,” Reuters, December 29, 2006. For a detailed analysis that concludes that radical Islam’s penetration of the former Yugoslavia is extensive and worrisome, see Christopher Deliso, *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam and the West* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2007).

xv. Olga Lola Ninkovic, “Montenegro Vote Spurs Bosnia Serb Referendum Calls,” Reuters, May 29, 2007.

xvi. See Ted Galen Carpenter, “Jackboot Nation Building: The West Brings ‘Democracy’ to Bosnia,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11 (Spring 2000).

xvii. Mary Anastasia O’Grady, “The Poor Get Richer,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2007. For an account that manages to miss nearly all of Bosnia’s political and economic deficiencies, see Ginanne Brownell and Kris Anderson, “Bosnia Reborn,” *Newsweek International*, August 6, 2006.

xviii. Nedim Dervisbegovic, “U.S. Urges Bosnians to Strengthen Common State,” Reuters, October 12, 2005. Under intense pressure from both the United States and the European Union, the three ethnic factions in Bosnia have taken some steps in that direction. Nedim Dervisbegovic, “Bosnians Agree to Reform Presidency, Parliament,” Reuters, May 18, 2006.

xix. Nicholas Wood, “Fiery Campaign Imperils Bosnia’s Progress,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2006; Andrew Purvis, “Can Bosnia’s Peace Survive?” *Time Europe*, October 2, 2006; “Bosnia Appears Split on Whether to Unify,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2006; and Dino Sito-Sucic, “Bosnian Serb PM Rejects U.S.-Backed Reform Plan,” Reuters, May 24, 2007.

xx. EU proponents still make that argument. See Judy Blatt, “The EU’s ‘Soft Power’ at Work in the Balkans,” EU Institute for Security Studies *Comment*, no. 19, July 2006.

xxi. Constant Brand, “EU Chief: Bulgaria, Romania and No More,” Associated Press, September 25, 2006; “German Leader Says Further EU Expansion Unlikely in Near Future,” Agence France Presse, October 7, 2006; and Paul Harrington, “EU Leaders Endorse Enlargement Slow Down,” Agence France Presse, December 15, 2006.