

US and Russia at loggerheads over Kosovo independence

Paul Mitchell
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Tensions between the United States and Russia, already inflamed at the G8 summit last month, have erupted over the issue of independence for Kosovo. The dispute is also splitting Europe, emboldening secessionist movements elsewhere to press for independence and threatening further instability in the Balkan region. There is widespread fear of further violence whether independence goes ahead or not.

The United States is threatening to bypass the United Nations in order to prevent Russia from using its veto on the Security Council to stop independence. On July 18, US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns declared that Kosovo will be independent by the end of 2007, restating George W. Bush's promise when he met with Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha last month.

Burns told the daily newspaper *Koha Ditore*, "The US will not allow anyone to come in the way of Kosovo's independence" and added that "this will happen either at the UN Security Council or through other mechanisms."

Burns said the US had delayed implementing the final status solution for Kosovo proposed by UN special envoy Martti Ahtisaari in order to allow Russia to be a part of the process, "but Russia has not been constructive."

Later that day, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice confirmed the US position, saying, "We are committed to an independent Kosovo and we will get there one way or another."

Kosovo has been administered as a protectorate since 1999 under the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which recognised Serbia's sovereignty over the province while simultaneously placing it under the occupation of foreign troops governed by an un-elected UN viceroy.

Formally, a new Security Council resolution is needed to pave the way for Kosovo's independence. In this case, "independence" should more accurately be understood as a transfer of control of a de-facto fiefdom of the Western powers from a UN high representative to a European Union (EU) high representative, empowered to overturn laws passed by the Kosovar parliament, remove public officials, and ensure that the diktats of international financial institutions are enforced.

To that end, the US and EU drafted a new Security Council resolution which calls for the transfer to take place over a 120-day period, during which time the Western powers will

exert pressure on the Kosovan Albanian majority and the province's Serb minority, which wants to remain part of Serbia, to come up with an agreement. EU officials have indicated they may hold another round of "proximity talks" starting in September, or organise an international conference modelled on the 1995 Dayton Accord that ended the war in Bosnia and has since enshrined ethnic divisions in three Bosnian mini-states.

The US and the EU warned Russia that if it vetoed the Security Council resolution they would pursue Kosovan independence through the informal Kosovo Contact Group, comprising the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia, but where Russia does not have a veto. EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said, "If it is not a possibility at the United Nations at this time, I'm sure there will be an agreement among members of the Contact Group to open a process of negotiations."

In the event, the US and EU withdrew the resolution and resolved to discuss the issue on July 25 in Berlin.

The resolution did not openly call for independence if talks fail, but Russia said the text still contained a hidden path toward Kosovo's independence which officials insisted was a breach of international law. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin said of the draft, "Almost the entire text and maybe particularly the annexes are permeated with the concept of the independence of Kosovo."

That the Western powers are pursuing Kosovo's independence so hastily is in part due to their having let the genie of Albanian nationalism out of the bottle when they boosted the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the 1999 air war to oust Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic. Earlier this year, several thousand Kosovo Albanians demonstrated against delays to independence. Two demonstrators were killed after UN police fired rubber bullets, leading to the resignation of the UN police chief and Kosovan interior minister.

The KLA leadership, which now enjoys top positions in the government of the province, is threatening to unilaterally declare independence. Kosovo Prime Minister and former KLA commander Agim Ceku declared on July 14, "The time is now. There is no need for discussion. There is nothing left to negotiate."

After the failure of the UN resolution to be passed, Ceku repeated calls for the Kosovo parliament to declare unilateral independence from Serbia on November 28—Independence Day in neighbouring Albania. Ceku said the parliament should discuss the proposal after his return from a meeting with Condoleezza Rice in Washington on July 23, where discussions on holding elections in Kosovo are due to take place.

Ceku also criticised moves to divide Kosovo along ethnic lines, as some analysts have suggested, saying, “Partition is not a solution, and it’s simply not possible... No one will agree and it will not be accepted.”

Ignoring his own role in ethnically dividing the Balkan region and the terrible conditions facing the Serb minority (20,000 houses belonging to Serb refugees have been occupied or burnt, and only 600 have been returned) Ceku added, “If you start to draw borders in the Balkans, where do you stop?”

The question, nevertheless, is one that deserves an answer. And it is one that has implications that go far beyond the Balkan region.

Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica repeated his demand for the preservation of Serbia’s territorial integrity, saying, “We will not accept an amputation of 15 percent of our territory. According to our constitution, the province of Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia.”

When asked by reporters if EU officials had suggested Serbia trade Kosovo’s independence for EU entry, he answered, “The offer is like this: If you want Europe you can forget Kosovo, if you want Kosovo you can forget Europe.” He complained, “Things cannot be like that. It’s an indecent offer.”

However, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner let it be known that Serbia will sign a preliminary agreement with the EU by the end of the year and become a candidate member in the second half of 2008, during France’s presidency. He warned Serbia, “Nonetheless, we harbour no illusions—there is the issue of Kosovo which has to be settled first.”

To overcome calls by other separatist forces for consideration of their claims for independence, the US and the EU have repeatedly stated that Kosovo is a *sui generis* case—whatever the final solution to its status, it cannot be copied for other disputes. However, Russian State Duma Chairman Boris Gryzlov said independence for Kosovo would encourage separatism in many countries worldwide, “including Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Spain, the UK and many African countries.”

Former deputy foreign minister and presidential candidate for Nagorno Karabakh, Masis Mailyan, suggested, “The Kosovo model of conflict settlement could be an example for the resolution of other conflicts... In this sense the Kosovo model is an interesting one for us. That is to say, we could achieve recognition under a new scenario.”

Elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, separatists in Georgia’s South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions, and in Moldova’s Transdnistria, also want international recognition

and say they are watching closely what happens in Kosovo.

The seriousness of the issue for Moscow in what it sees as its sphere of influence was hinted at in an op-ed piece by Novosti news agency political commentator Pyotr Romanov. He warned, “The old order is crumbling before our very eyes. Russia has firmly upheld the territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova, in line with international law and even though its relations with these states are far from ideal. What should it do now, support separatist tendencies on its border? Or withdraw from the UN? This reminds me of the demise of the League of Nations and of the run-up to World War II.”

The Balkan region has once again become a patchwork of ethnically divided states at the mercy of great power intrigues.

One need not look to 1939 in order to understand the dangers involved. At the end of the Kosovo conflict in June 1999, 200 Russian troops briefly occupied Pristina airport. Moscow had expected to police its own sector of Kosovo, independently of NATO.

NATO’s K-For peacekeepers were preparing to enter Kosovo on June 12, but were met by Russian troops who had moved in from Bosnia. In collaboration with NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark ordered 500 British and French paratroopers to be put on standby to occupy the airport.

The BBC later reported that the plan was blocked by General Sir Mike Jackson, K-For’s British commander, who told Clark, “I’m not going to start the Third World War for you.”

The Russians took the airport and had plans to fly in thousands of troops. General Leonid Ivashev said, “Let’s just say that we had several airbases ready. We had battalions of paratroopers ready to leave within two hours.”

Clark planned to order British tanks and armoured cars to block the runways, but was once more vetoed by Britain. A deal on Russian troop deployment was subsequently agreed, but for a period it looked as if Kosovo might be partitioned into a Serbian area in the north and an ethnically Albanian area in the south. The plan for independence has raised these fears once again, and with them the very real possibility of war.



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