

War danger grows after Kosovo status talks collapse

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Last week, three mediators from the United States, the European Union and Russia announced their failure to bring about a negotiated solution between local ethnic Albanian and Serbian leaders, as well as Serbia, on Kosovo's future status. Kosovo is presently a province of Serbia, but the dominant Albanian elite is pushing for independence.

The mediators' report, which will be submitted to the United Nations Security Council on December 19, states that "Neither party was willing to cede its position on the fundamental question of sovereignty over Kosovo."

Behind the regional ruling elites stand rival major powers, which are using them as pawns in the struggle to consolidate and expand their global economic and strategic interests.

Kosovo has become a volatile arena, reminiscent of the terrible years preceding the First World War, of great power rivalry. The US, along with the major European powers, is asserting its interests in the former Soviet republics and spheres of influence. Russia, encouraged by rising oil revenues and the crisis in Iraq, is seeking to realise its own aspirations as a regional and world power.

Following the report of the mediators, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared it was "very clear" that negotiations were "at an end." "That means we have to move on to the next step. It is not going to help to put off decisions that need to be taken," she added.

Rice's "next step" is to speed up the plan for "supervised" independence of Kosovo proposed by UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari earlier this year. US mediator Frank Wisner said Ahtisaari's plan was "still alive and well, and a good road forward." His remark that it "was never taken off the table" during the talks shows that the negotiations were never more than a means to deliver an ultimatum to Serbia to agree to Kosovan independence.

It is now expected that Hashim Thaci, the former Kosovo Liberation Army leader, who is expected to become Kosovo's prime minister following elections last month, will make a "co-ordinated declaration of independence" early next year.

This will give time to the US and European powers such as Britain, France, Germany and Italy to increase the pressure on other EU member states worried about encouraging separatist tensions in their own countries to agree to independence.

According to Sweden's Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, the EU now had "virtual unity" over the issue of Kosovan independence with the exception of Cyprus, which is concerned about the status of the Turkish-controlled northern part of the island.

Western leaders also hope that a slight delay will benefit the more pro-Western Democratic Party candidate Boris Tadic in Serbia's presidential elections, expected to take place on January 20, in his contest against Tomislav Nikolic, the deputy leader of the extreme nationalist Serb Radical Party, currently the largest opposition party.

The next step in the Ahtisaari plan will be for the newly independent Kosovo to "ask" the EU to send police and justice missions and appoint a high representative to administer the transition from UN control whilst "agreeing" to the continued presence of NATO troops. The EU will attempt to soften up Serbia by offering to speed up the process leading to its membership in the bloc.

Serbia and Russia reject the Ahtisaari plan and are urging the December 19 UN Security Council meeting to agree to further talks on Kosovo's future status. Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica said, "In Europe, the solutions for even much smaller problems than Kosovo are sought through negotiations, and it is unthinkable that someone does not want to negotiate, and instead opts for unilateral solutions."

Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Bozidar Djelic added, "If Belgium needs six months to form a government, and if it took Northern Ireland 36 years and the Middle East decades, why not organise several additional rounds of negotiations."

Russian UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin complained that in the past two years, the Serbian government has agreed to Kosovo having unprecedented control over its own affairs. "The only thing the Serbs are not prepared to accept is Kosovo's membership in international political organisations like the UN, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and certain others."

In the event of Thaci declaring independence, the Serbian government has drawn up a list of measures, such as sealing the border with Kosovo and cutting diplomatic relations with countries that recognise it. Officials point to the fact that Serbia supplies all of Kosovo's electricity. Although Serbian Defence

Minister Dragan Sutanovac said that there were no plans to intervene militarily, Rade Negojevc, an official in the Serbian ministry responsible for Kosovo, said, “The Serbian army will react to protect its citizens.” And one of Kostunica’s advisers, Aleksandar Simic, received a sharp rebuke from European leaders after he told state television last week that “war is a legal means, too.” Referring to the 1990s Balkan wars, Simic said Serbia “had some bad experiences and that’s why there is a lot of caution and patience now. But state interests are also defended by war.”

In reply, Bajram Rexhepi, Kosovo’s former prime minister, warned that any intervention by Serbian forces would also mean war.

The Western powers have responded with their own threats, while making a hypocritical pretence that their actions have played no part in bringing about the danger of another Balkan war. “No violence will be tolerated,” said NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, adding, “Anyone who thinks violence might be a solution to the problem is wrong.”

Russia has blamed the collapse of the talks particularly on the US. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “Unfortunately, the orientation of some Western countries, primarily the United States, that independence has no alternative, about which they talk publicly all the time, is, of course, the main obstacle in the search for a negotiated solution.”

He pointed out that an EU Mission to Kosovo is not permitted under UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which ended the bombing of Serbia in 1999 by NATO forces and paved the way for the UN Mission in Kosovo and the installation of KFOR troops. The resolution stipulated that Kosovo was to remain part of Serbia, but under UN administration, and could only be changed or modified through a new resolution, which Russia, as a member of the Security Council has so far blocked.

“Anyone who goes in contravention of [the status quo] is on a very slippery downward slope,” Lavrov warned. He said recognising a unilateral declaration of independence would “not remain without consequences” and “will create a chain reaction throughout the Balkans and other areas of the world.”

This has already led to Boris Gryzlov, speaker of the Russian State Duma, leader of United Russia, and close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, to declare that Moscow is ready to formally recognise the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in January. Georgia maintains a long-standing territorial claim to the two regions, which declared independence after the fall of the Soviet Union but are not recognised by any other country.

General Sir Mike Jackson, the former British Army chief who commanded KFOR when it took over the province in 1999, said people “should not underestimate the volatility of this situation.” “While both Kosovar and Serb leaders claim to oppose the use of force to achieve their aims, the same cannot be said of the ethnic paramilitary groupings.”

Reports suggest that Serbs who live in scattered enclaves in Kosovo are already making preparations to flee to the Serb-dominated northern part of the province, which may announce its own secession. A raft of other separatist claims could follow, including from Serbs living in the Republika Srpska region of Bosnia and ethnic Albanians living in the Presovo Valley in southern Serbia and in Macedonia.

The catastrophic conditions facing the people of the Balkans demonstrate the reactionary implications of the various forms of nationalism that have been promoted in the region by both imperialism and Stalinism.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Balkans have assumed exceptional strategic importance as a staging post for the projection of imperialist power towards the vital energy reserves of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The US and its Western allies set about dismantling the unitary Yugoslav Federation in 1991 by officially recognising its various republics—beginning with Slovenia, Croatia, and then Bosnia—as independent sovereign states.

The major powers formed alliances with some of the region’s rival bourgeois and petty-bourgeois semi-criminal cliques such as the KLA that were seeking to consolidate themselves as a comprador ruling elite with Western support, against Serbia, which was the strongest of the regional nascent capitalist powers, with the most interest therefore in maintaining some unitary federal structure. In this, they were assisted by the various liberals and middle class radicals calling for “national self-determination” for all the ethnic groups. Serbia was cast in the role of regional oppressor while equally reactionary nationalist regimes and movements were afforded fulsome praise and support.

The result was the Bosnian war between March 1992 and November 1995, involving a struggle between Serbia and Croatia that cost tens of thousands of lives and ended with the first imperialist military intervention in the Balkans since the Second World War. The drive for Kosovar independence pursued from that time onwards by the KLA, with US backing, culminated in the war in 1999 that saw the massive and sustained NATO bombardment of Serbia, and its defeat.

The renewed push for Kosovar independence raises once more the spectre of ethnic cleansing and direct imperialist military intervention. But this takes place under conditions where tensions between the US, Europe and Russia are running even higher than they were in 1999. What is posed, therefore, is not merely a re-run of that earlier conflict. If the first twenty-first century war on European soil breaks out, it could easily develop into a far wider conflagration.



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