

Kosovo “independence” brings new uncertainties in Asia

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22 February 2008

The unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo, with the support of the US and a number of European powers, has produced destabilising shockwaves beyond the Balkans. There is a widespread recognition in Asia and elsewhere that carving out a nation-state by recognising a small group of people on ethnic or religious lines could apply to any country.

China immediately opposed Kosovo independence, anxious to stop Taiwan and separatist movements in Tibet or Xinjiang from following the example. Some Asian governments that are battling against separatism in their own countries, such as Sri Lanka, have refused to recognise Kosovo.

Kosovo’s breakaway from Serbia has emboldened Taiwan’s pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government. Taipei was among the first states to recognise Kosovo. Foreign Minister James Huang declared at a press conference on February 19: “The Kosovo people, after overcoming various difficulties, have achieved independence. This is worth our admiration.” Huang hailed “self-determination” as “a holy right” enshrined in the UN Charter, which Taiwan could claim.

China regards Taiwan as a renegade province after the former Kuomintang dictatorship fled to the island during the 1949 revolution. Beijing has repeatedly threatened to use military force to reincorporate Taiwan, if it declared formal independence from China. Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian has been counting on political and military support from the US. The Bush administration has criticised Chen in recent years for trying to unilaterally change the “status quo”. But Chen has argued that if Washington backed Kosovo, there is no reason why the US should not support Taiwan.

The Chinese foreign ministry responded to Taiwan’s recognition of Kosovo with a statement that as part of China, Taipei had no right at all to do so. It warned that Beijing would not allow Taiwan to be “split” from China by anyone or any means.

For China the stakes go beyond Taiwan. An analysis on February 19 by the Inter Press Service News Agency noted: “By casting a controversial vote to secede from Serbia, Kosovo is threatening to set up a precedent for China’s 56 recognised national minorities that occupy more than half of the country’s territory. In addition, there are special administrative regions such as Hong Kong and Macau and the territory of Taiwan, which in theory have the same relationship to Beijing as Kosovo has to Belgrade.”

Almost immediately after Kosovo’s announcement, Beijing

released news on Monday of a major “counter-terrorism” operation last month in the Muslim Uighurs “autonomous” region of Xinjiang, also known as “East Turkestan”. Two were killed and 15 arrested. The next day Beijing accused “Eastern Turkestan terrorists” of plotting to attack the Olympic Games in August. The report is a signal that the Chinese government will unleash a wave of suppression against separatist activities in Xinjiang, Tibet and other parts of China.

Beijing has also expressed alarm about the implications for the United Nations. The actions of the US, France and Britain—three of the five veto powers in the UN Security Council—to support Kosovo, threatened to split the council. The two other veto powers, Russia and China, opposed any UN endorsement of Kosovo’s independence.

Wang Guangya, China’s UN ambassador, expressed “deep concern” over Kosovo. He declared at an emergency Security Council meeting that the unilateral action by Kosovo had seriously compromised the credibility and authority of the council “as the primary organ for safeguarding world peace and security”. Wang said the actions of Kosovo’s leaders and their backers threatened to make UN resolutions “a mere scrap of paper”.

The Beijing-controlled media has declared that the real aim of the Western powers is to weaken Moscow’s geopolitical position. *Beijing News* on Monday stated in an editorial: “Supporting Kosovo’s independence against Serbia’s will is an indirect attack on Russia’s strategic space in Europe and the Balkans”. A Chinese expert on international relations, Ma Xiaolin wrote in the *Beijing Youth Daily*: “Kosovo’s independence is an ultimate result of US-led military intervention by NATO and is designed to contain Russia.”

During the NATO military campaign against Serbia in 1999, the US bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, marking a turning point toward a more aggressive US policy toward China. The Bush administration came to office in 2001 on a platform that labelled Beijing a “strategic competitor” of the US. The US intervention into Afghanistan under the banner of the “war on terror” and the full-scale invasion of Iraq in 2003 were aimed at seizing the vast energy resources in Central Asia and Middle East. These US moves compelled China to forge close political and, increasingly, military relations with Russia.

Russia and China created the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 by including several other Central Asian republics. The objectives of the group are to counter the US

presence in Central Asia and the Caspian region. China and Russia are deeply concerned that separatist movements such as those in Chechnya or Xinjiang may become agents—like the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)—for the Western powers. The primary official aim of the SCO is to fight against “separatism, extremism and terrorism”.

China and Russia have held joint military exercises in the Yellow Sea in 2005 and in the Urals region last August, sending a warning to various separatist movements, advocates of pro-Western “colour revolutions” and the Taiwanese government. Economically, the SCO seeks to exploit the vast oil and gas resources in Central Asia to build an “energy club” that attracts India, Iran and other states. This perspective has directly undercut US plans to control the energy resources in the Eurasian heartland.

Japan, the principal US ally in Northeast Asia, did not immediately recognise Kosovo although it has agreed in principle to do so. Japanese chief government spokesman Nobutaka Machimura told reporters on Sunday: “We need to examine if Kosovo meets the conditions as a state legally and politically, but I cannot say how long the process will take.” The political stakes for Japan are not insignificant.

Moscow has warned that Japan’s involvement in the US missile defence system represents a threat to Russia. To send a message to Japan, a Russian strategic bomber flew over Japanese air space earlier this month, prompting Japan to scramble 22 fighter jets. Tokyo’s recognition of Kosovo will further constrain Russo-Japanese relations, even as Japan is seeking to get access to oil and gas supplies from the Russian Far East.

India has been trying to deflect pressure to take a side on the Kosovo issue. Indian Foreign Office spokesman Navtej Sarna declared on Monday that there were “several legal issues” on the Kosovo declaration and the government was “studying the evolving situation”. He added: “It has been India’s consistent position that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries should be fully respected by all states.”

New Delhi is concerned about its own separatist movements, especially in Kashmir. Yasin Malik, the leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, told the Iranian-based Islamic Republic News Agency: “The international community, particularly the European Union, should play a pro-active role now towards the resolution of Kashmir issue as they did in case of Kosovo.”

India’s stance also reflects its strategic dilemma. While the Bush administration has been trying to court India as a counterweight against China, New Delhi has been careful not to antagonise Beijing. India has joined the SCO as an “observer” state. Declaring support for Kosovo would certainly damage India’s relations with its long-standing ally, Russia.

Sri Lanka has bitterly denounced the move. Its foreign ministry issued a statement that read: “The unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo could set an unmanageable precedent in the conduct of international relations, the established global order of sovereign states and could thus pose a grave threat to international peace and security.”

Unable to address the social aspirations of Sinhalese masses and Tamil minority, the Sri Lankan ruling elite is mired in a 25-year devastating civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Colombo fears that Kosovo’s independence would bolster the LTTE’s calls for an independent Tamil state.

Even some US allies in Southeast Asia were cautious about supporting Kosovo. Indonesia, a sprawling country of 18,000 islands and hundreds of ethnic groups, issued a statement that read: “The government of Indonesia will follow developments closely in Kosovo, but it is not yet in a position to recognise this unilateral declaration of independence.” Jakarta fears Kosovo will incite separatist tendencies in Aceh, West Papua and the Maluku islands. In 1999, East Timor broke away from Indonesia as a result of Australian and Portuguese machinations to extend their influences in the region.

Philippines’ Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo called for a “negotiated solution mutually acceptable to all parties”. While Manila did not oppose an independent Kosovo, it was necessary to “taking into account the internationally accepted principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity”. For over 30 years, the Filipino government has been fighting against the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the southern Mindanao region and is just starting talks about giving more “autonomy” to the Muslim minority.

Only Australia, which engineered the “independence” of East Timor, has enthusiastically recognised Kosovo. “Australia wishes the government of Kosovo well in the tasks ahead,” Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said. Australia’s 1999 intervention in East Timor echoed the claims of “ethical imperialism” made by the NATO powers in relation to Kosovo. The US claimed the bombing of Serbia was necessary in order to defend the Kosovo Albanians from being killed by Serbian forces. The former Howard government postured as a champion of the East Timorese people who were being massacred by Indonesian militias.

An “independent” Kosovo will be no more free of oppression than East Timor, where Australian troops are propping up the local government. Australia intervened in East Timor to strengthen its geopolitical influence in South Pacific and plunder the gas reserves in the Timor Sea. Just as the Timor masses are still mired in extreme poverty and chronic unemployment a decade later, the fate of Kosovo’s people will be little different, if not worse, under the domination of the US and European powers.



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