

The case of Kosovo: “Self-determination” as an instrument of imperialist policy

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20 February 2008

The support of the US and the major European powers for Kosovo’s unilateral secession from Serbia, in the face of fierce opposition from Serbia and Russia, as well as China, marks a turning point in international politics.

The action was carried out without the sanction of the United Nations Security Council and in contravention of UN resolutions enacted following the 1999 US-NATO air war against Serbia. It sets a precedent that separatist movements across Europe and Asia are likely to seize upon, causing concern among some EU member states that have refused to recognize an independent Kosovo, including Spain (which fears the implications for the Basque region) and Greece (which sees a heightened threat of an independent Turkish state in the north of Cyprus).

The Bush administration and the European Union have sought to circumvent these concerns by declaring that Kosovo is a “*sui generis*” case, i.e., a politically and historically unique situation that cannot be regarded as a precedent for others. They are, however, unable to substantiate this position, which remains nothing more than a bald assertion.

European foreign ministers meeting Monday in Brussels, echoing US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, declared that the Albanian Kosovars are unique because no other native population has been so brutally deprived of its rights—another assertion that can be refuted by reference to any number of ethnic minorities, among them Native Americans, who have been more brutally repressed.

In fact, the pre-war claims made by the US and NATO in early 1999 of hundreds of thousands of Kosovar deaths at the hands of Serb troops and militia were, after the end of the three-month air war, exposed to have been vast exaggerations. For their part, the Kosovar rulers installed by the US and NATO have been no less brutal towards the Serb minority in the province than the ousted regime of Slobodan Milosevic was toward the ethnic Albanians.

The justification given by the US and European powers such as Germany, France and Britain for backing an independent Kosovo continues with the complaint that Belgrade and Moscow had turned down any form of compromise. Therefore, recognition of the desire of the Kosovan people for national independence was, the argument goes, inevitable.

In reality, it is the Western imperialist powers that have deliberately incited ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia to further their own interests. The situation in Kosovo is primarily the result of their own policies.

In 1991, Germany triggered the bloody break-up of the Yugoslav state by supporting and endorsing independence for Slovenia and Croatia. The US followed suit and enforced the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The result was the four-year war in Bosnia, involving a heavy loss of life and in which the great powers eventually intervened with their own troops.

Finally, NATO used the independence movement in Kosovo, which it helped to foment, in order to move against Serbia. In 1999, at the “peace” conference in Rambouillet, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright issued the Serbian government an impossible ultimatum. When the Serbian government turned it down, NATO reacted with a military offensive.

At that time, Albright and her colleagues, Joschka Fischer in Germany and Robin Cook in Great Britain, were already relying on Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) leader Hashim Thaci, who is now the prime minister of Kosovo. This was despite the fact that the KLA had been designated a terrorist organization by the US government a year earlier. Thaci himself was being sought by the Serbian authorities because of attacks on security forces, and was suspected of executing dissidents within his own movement and cultivating ties to the drug mafia.

Since the end of the 1999 war, Kosovo has been under UN administration, i.e., under the military and political control of those powers that had waged the war. The first UN administrator, from 1999 to 2001, was Bernard Kouchner, who now, as the French foreign minister, was among the first to declare diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Kosovo.

The UN administration gave the ultra-nationalists a free hand. A report published recently by Amnesty International provides a devastatingly negative balance sheet. “The UN mission either did not investigate adequately or completely failed to investigate hundreds of crimes such as murders, rapes, kidnappings and expulsions,” wrote Jan Digel, the Kosovo expert for Amnesty.

According to the European Roma Rights Centre in Budapest, over two thirds of the 120,000 Roma and Ashkali living in Kosovo were driven out of the province following the NATO bombardment. It was the most comprehensive ethnic cleansing of Roma since the Second World War. Many thousands of Serbs were also forced to leave Kosovo, with the remaining 120,000 living in isolated Serbian enclaves.

Although the government in Pristina now professes adherence to the rights of minorities—whose ranks include Turks, Bosnjaks and other smaller groups alongside the Serbs and Roma—there has been

no let-up in the attacks on national minorities in the province.

The declaration of independence last Sunday took place in close cooperation with the so-called Contact Group, consisting of the US, France, Germany, Britain and Italy. It was prepared over a long time.

Already one year ago, the former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari submitted a plan for independence, which met with resolute opposition from Serbia and Russia. Although Ahtisaari's proposal was rejected at the time, it served as a framework and set a timetable for independence. Every step in the process—including a date for independence—was then coordinated between Kosovan Prime Minister Thaci and the Contact Group.

The resulting Republic of Kosovo is neither economically nor politically viable, and is nothing more than a protectorate set up by the great powers. In anticipation of independence, the European Union put together a force comprising 2,000 policemen, judges, prison wardens and customs officers, which will largely administer the province with the support of some 1,000 local officials. This so-called Eulex mission is under the command of the French four-star general Yves de Kermabon, who has many years of experience with military deployments in Africa and the Balkans. The Eulex mission is to be supported by the 16,000 NATO soldiers already stationed in Kosovo.

The social situation in Kosovo is catastrophic. More than half of its 2 million inhabitants are unemployed, and every year an additional 30,000 young people join those looking for non-existent jobs. Over a third of the population lives on less than €1.50 per day. The average wage amounts to €220 (about \$320) per month.

Control of the Balkans is of great strategic importance for both the US and the European powers, and the prerequisite for this control is the dissolution of Yugoslavia, which has now been completed with the secession of Kosovo.

The US maintains one of its largest military bases on European soil in Kosovo—Camp Bondsteel, near Urosevac. Camp Bondsteel also serves as a base for so-called “renditions,” involving the kidnapping and torture of alleged terror suspects. Washington's military bases in the Balkans and Eastern Europe are part of the US strategy to encircle Russia by penetrating the former spheres of influence of the Soviet Union. At the same time, they serve to reinforce American influence in Europe.

The European powers, and above all Germany, also regard their intervention in the Balkans as crucial for enhancing their weight in Europe. The fact that the US is able to play such a leading role in Europe's “back yard” is regarded by the European media as painful proof of the continent's impotence.

Kosovo and the Balkans as a whole constitute an important access route to the Black Sea and the energy supplies of the Caspian Basin. There is currently a range of plans for competing gas and oil pipelines in which Kosovo plays an important role. Kosovo also has its own reserves of gold, lead, tin and brown coal.

In the ruthless pursuit of their own interests, the US and EU powers have swept aside basic elements of international law.

In an analysis of its implications for the international order, the British *Guardian* (February 19) concludes that “recognition of Kosovo's independence will contribute to the further erosion of two of the fundamental pillars of the international

system—sovereign equality and the principle of the inviolability of borders.”

The article refutes the claim that the human rights abuses committed by Serbia under Milosevic justify the current case for independence, because “first, it clearly ignores the plethora of human rights violations against Serbs and non-Albanians that have taken place since 1999, notably the March 2004 outbreaks of violence,” and “second, there is little to suggest that the human rights violations used to justify Kosovo's independence would return if alternatives to independence, such as substantial autonomy, were proposed as solutions.”

Even more dangerous, according to the *Guardian*, is the argument “that Serbia's loss of effective control over Kosovo, which has been under international administration since 1999, equates to a loss of sovereignty over the province.”

“Accepting this precedent,” the newspaper warns, “would have damaging implications for similar peace-building efforts as countries become increasingly wary about authorising missions that would engender a loss of effective control over their own territory.”

“Furthermore,” the *Guardian* goes on, “as [the UN mission's] presence derives from an illegal use of force by NATO, any change of borders justified by a resulting loss of effective control would constitute a changing of borders by military means—an act explicitly outlawed by the UN charter and one which the international community has consistently refused to validate throughout the post-war period.”

The article concludes: “Setting aside the prime doctrines that have underpinned the international order since the Second World War provides the most dangerous precedent of recognising Kosovo's independence. Undermining both sovereign equality and the principle of the inviolability of borders collapses the crucial distinction between international law and politics, with detrimental implications for global peace and security.”

Both Russia and Serbia have reacted to the declaration of independence by Kosovo with severe warnings.

Serbia has threatened to impose economic sanctions on Kosovo, and in his annual press conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin turned on the US and EU to declare: “If one continues to pursue policies based on so-called political expediency to serve the interests of individual states, then international law and the world order will be destroyed.”

At the same time, he threatened to point Russian nuclear missiles toward Europe should the US go ahead with its plans to set up a missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, or if Ukraine were to join NATO.



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