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KOSOVA: THE CORE OF THE BALKANS

Kosova is neither a weak state nor a failed state but an aspiring state heavily dependent on international actors. Two years after NATO's liberation of Kosova from Milosevic's Yugoslavia, it is important to evaluate conditions and prospects in the aspiring state and to offer some concrete recommendations for further evolution. Above all, it remains clear that Kosova occupies a central position in the Balkans both geographically and strategically and its development, whether positive or negative, will have reverberations throughout the region. In sum, four critical issues converge in the NATO-held territory: the struggle for national independence, the impact of outside intervention, the resolution of the Balkan-wide "Albanian question," and the ongoing process of Europeanization.

Independence on the Agenda

However much the "international community" studiously seeks to avoid the issue, it is obvious that the most important objective for all Albanian Kosovars is national independence. It is equally apparent that with Montenegro moving toward a referendum on independence in the spring of 2002, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia may soon cease to exist. We have seen for the past decade that federal Yugoslavia was a failed state held together primarily through violence and now by international support. Two outstanding questions are therefore left to answer in the case of Kosova: how and when is statehood to be achieved? It is evident that any attempt to pressurize or entice Kosova into another subordinate relationship with Belgrade, whether through federalism or autonomy, will restoke conflicts and could even spark a renewed insurgency movement among frustrated Albanians.

The possibility of any regressive moves by the internationals has persuaded some former KLA (Kosova Liberation Army) operatives to prepare contingency plans for a possible Serbian-Yugoslav military takeover. Indeed, it would be irresponsible for former Kosovar fighters to pursue complete demobilization and organizational disbanding given the prospect of international military withdrawal and Belgrade's political ambitions to "regain Kosovo" still hovering over the region. In sum, the lack of clarity on Kosova's "final status" and its unclear future security has inevitably encouraged contingencies and preparations for a renewed guerrilla war. There is little doubt that Belgrade has also developed contingency plans for a military takeover of the "province" once NATO departs.

The final status of Kosova cannot be postponed indefinitely and in reality the Bush White House simply cannot pass the decision on to the next U.S. administration. This is especially true given Washington's repeated commitment to scaling down American peace-keeping assignments. The only valid solution in these circumstances is a twin-track approach: steady moves toward institutionalising independence and Kosovar self-reliance and a determination to deter Belgrade from any threat of a military takeover through a long-term security guarantee.

The upcoming general elections in Kosova will therefore become an invaluable stage in legitimising Kosova's politicians and building authoritative indigenous institutions. Throughout the election and post-election process, international players must aim to empower the emerging central government in Prishtina, to create an effective legislature, to maximize local initiatives, and increase support for the most civic-oriented political parties, media networks, and non-governmental organizations.

Elections can help to legitimise politicians who have felt largely excluded from the governing process or in a limbo-like position until the status question is permanently resolved. Legitimate elections will also contribute to undercutting political polarization and rival claims

by political groups that only they represent Kosova's "national interests." The incoming administration in Prishtina will have to take substantial responsibility for building a sovereign democratic state. It must promote consensus and not division on the most vital reformist issues. It must ensure progress toward far-ranging restructuring with a cross-party commitment by the new legislature to institutional reform whatever differences may exist between specific political formations. Successful political stabilization requires the consolidation of accountable and authoritative democratic institutions based on constitutional principles.

It is therefore vital for Kosova to develop an indigenous constitution that can help concentrate political energy, give credence to legality, and provide a more solid basis for democratic development. All major political players must support such an approach, as it would help secure the foundations of statehood. The organs of government would then acquire the confidence of the public and the respect of the internationals. Meanwhile, any extremist parties advocating ultra-nationalist and authoritarian solutions will have to be exposed and marginalized so that they do not undermine the body politic of the aspiring state.

The internationals cannot sit on the sidelines but must contribute in the building of a secure law-abiding state. Among the many tasks facing both foreign and domestic actors are tangible improvements in efficiency, competence, and professionalism among government officials and the civil service. A core civic administration needs to be developed that provides continuity and credibility regardless of changes in government. Equally importantly, Kosova must build a judicial system that will be both independent and competent, and in which equality before the law is guaranteed, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or creed. Both the majority and the minorities can thereby develop trust in the system and loyalty to the new state structures.

In the security arena, the police and intelligence forces require strict governmental control and supervision as well as the authority and capability to improve their effectiveness. Public trust in the police forces will grow as their success in fighting crime and restoring law and order increases, with substantial international assistance. The new government must focus on expanding professional police departments with Western help as this will build public confidence in these vital indigenous institutions. And of course the law enforcement agencies and the judicial system must become serious players in combating corruption and organized criminality in all their pernicious manifestations.

The evolution of a multi-faceted and multi-organizational civil society will limit the focus on exclusivist ethnic and national questions. Encouraging popular participation in a broad range of civic groups and voluntary organizations will in turn greatly enhance civic confidence in the reform process and in the legitimacy of the political system. Underpinning such developments, significant changes are needed in Kosova's political culture in which decades of anti-democratic ideology and nationalist defensiveness are effectively countered. Both public institutions and public perceptions will require transformation and in this endeavour a broad campaign of civic education is essential.

Given its recent history, the alternatives to independence remain bleak. The indefinite "non-status" stalemate or the proposed return of Kosova to Serbian or Yugoslav control may actually exacerbate the problems already faced by international actors in guaranteeing security and building credible local institutions. Any disconnections between indigenous self-determination and international goals for the territory will create rifts and contradictions. These can undermine the progress of institutional self-determination, which the upcoming elections are supposed to encourage and bolster. In this context, any agreements between UNMIK and Belgrade over the heads of the Albanian population and its elected representatives are illegitimate and undemocratic and must be rejected by Prishtina.

The Impact of the International Intervention

The United Nations mandate in Kosova was ultimately designed to return the territory to Belgrade's jurisdiction. Presumably, a large-scale international military and political presence will be necessary until conditions have been met for either a peaceful reintegration of the territory or the final acceptance of Kosova's statehood. In the meantime, a counter-productive dependency relationship has emerged between Kosovars and international institutions that may become increasingly difficult to overcome the longer the current "stalemate" continues. Such a relationship could seriously threaten the development of indigenous institutions and democratic procedures.

A major problem for all multi-national institutions and Western leaders is how to prevent Kosova from developing into a permanent international protectorate with externally appointed administrations largely bereft of domestic authority or legitimacy. At the other extreme, international agencies must seek to ensure that any accelerated disengagement by foreign bodies does not unravel the results painstakingly achieved on the territory, particularly in the security arena, and even reignite armed confrontations.

While NATO has clearly ensured overall security in Kosova and deterred any likelihood of a Yugoslav reinvasion, the United Nations and its various offshoots have proved to be less successful. Indeed, UNMIK has been accused by various observers of counter-productive measures, including the creation of colonial-like bureaucracies, of favouring foreign over indigenous organizations, of duplicating efforts between different international agencies, and of wasting reconstruction and democratisation resources. Given these charges, it is important to more vigorously pursue constructive steps for promoting indigenous institutions that can give structure and content to democratic pluralism and Kosovar self-determination.

Urgently needed is consistent progress in the state-building process, the construction of legitimate and participatory institutions, and the assurance of inter-state security. This would help consolidate and expand positive regional developments that would contribute to eliminating impending crisis and conflict. Dependent states or denied states are ultimately weak states.

Inevitably, any strategy of "indigenisation" involves certain risks and unpredictabilities. Although the primary risk is of a rapid disengagement that provokes fresh hostilities, other variables must be considered.

Without the anchoring of democratic governance, Kosova may become susceptible to authoritarianism or to political elements interlinked with the criminal underworld. Alternatively, political fracturing and institutional paralysis may accompany a large-scale international withdrawal. In order to avoid such scenarios and to guarantee that self-determination is effective, outside actors must focus on the preconditions for long-term security during a decreasing international presence.

Both the central and local Kosovar authorities will have to obtain the authority and resources to govern and not simply to consult with international agencies. There is still an overall lack of clarity as to the power of the proposed central government and its relationship with the UN authorities and eventually the Serbian and Yugoslav governments. Such confusion and uncertainty breeds local radicalism and irresponsibility, encourages nationalist revanchism in Belgrade, and actually prolongs the foreign presence, thus contradicting stated U.S. policy.

A vexing problem for the internationals has been the demands of local Serbian leaders for Kosova's canonisation. They have sought to establish Serb majority districts in parts of northern Kosova while gaining their own local administration and retaining special ties with Serbia. Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic has recently proposed a "special status" for the

Serbian minority in self-governing territorial units. Such proposals have been rejected by international representatives as they could herald a formal partition of Kosova along ethnic lines. Albanian leaders adamantly oppose any such solutions and demand full territorial integrity under a single government.

Acceptance of future independence with a roadmap and timetable to achieve such a goal could undercut the threat of a new Serbian takeover by deligitimizing Belgrade's incessant claims that the territory will return to Serbia – a stance that simply encourages militancy and polarization. In contrast, definite criteria and timetables for a democratic independent state will give both the internationals and the locals a concrete goal toward which political, institutional, and economic reconstruction can be directed.

And last but not least, a package involving a permanent NATO security guarantee for the territory, the development of an effective European-based rapid reaction force, and Serbia's involvement in NATO's Partnership for Peace Program (PfP), together with other confidence-building measures, will significantly diminish any temptations for future military action by Belgrade.

A Regional Albanian Solution

The past year has witnessed the emergence of "Greater Albanianism" as a major preoccupation of the international community. With the break-up of Yugoslavia, the birth of several new Balkan states, and Albania's emergence from international isolation in the past decade, the position of the Albanian population came under increasing pressure from all sides. Conflicts have been visible between demands for centralism by Serbia and Macedonia, in particular, and Albanian aspirations for self-determination or outright independence. Moreover, instability in Albania itself has threatened to further unsettle the region by promoting lawlessness and cross-border conflicts.

However, it is misleading to assume that there is an overarching "Greater Albania" conspiracy that seeks to create an "ethnic Albania" in the region encompassing states or parts of states with Albanian majorities. Instead, there is a pan-Albanian feeling of cross-border nationhood that has been exploited both by Albanian and anti-Albanian militants. Only marginal groups have campaigned for an expansion of Albanian territory while major parties in Albania, Kosova, Macedonia, and Montenegro have not favoured any border revisions at the expense of neighbours.

Outside of Albania itself, three kinds of movements have been visible among the Albanian populations: an outright independence movement in Kosova, an equal rights movement in Macedonia, and a communal revivalist movement in Montenegro. Certain tendencies within these movements have pan-Albanian aspirations, but it would be too simplistic to view them as part of some overarching "Greater Albania" program.

Albanian leaders across the region consistently repudiate the notion of a "Greater Albania" or a "Greater Kosova." Concurrently, they underscore that a durable peace and a secure region ultimately depends on the recognition of Kosova's independence. The current ambiguity and the potential fluidity of borders is exploited by militants and criminals, encourages anti-Albanian nationalism, and jeopardizes NATO's mission throughout the region. A durable inter-ethnic political settlement in Macedonia and Kosova's upcoming elections can help dispel the claim that an independent Kosova will lead to political instability. It is the lack of a credible political future that has contributed to embroiling both Kosova and Macedonia in spasms of instability. The prospect of democratic statehood can and must eradicate radicalism and chaos.

The Albanian population in the Balkans is overwhelmingly young and growing faster than that of any other ethnic group, even given the high rates of emigration. It is a dynamic population whose energies must be channelled toward constructive and productive causes such as economic development, entrepreneurship, education, political responsibility, and international integration. Otherwise, frustration and shrinking opportunities could encourage the growth of radical and armed groups or feed the scourge of organized criminality. In this respect, independence for Kosova and the political contract in Macedonia could help dispel these destructive tendencies and transform the younger generation into a vital pillar of development for the Balkan region.

All responsible Albanian leaders must declare their unequivocal recognition of Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Serbian independence and territorial integrity as Kosovar statehood becomes a reality. They must openly state that they harbour no designs or pretensions to these states and do not support any violent groups along Kosova's frontiers. The undermining of Macedonia's sovereignty will simply stiffen resistance to Kosova's statehood, imperil inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia itself, and undercut international sympathy for the Albanian community. Macedonia cannot become a bargaining chip for either Belgrade or Prishtina, because its integrity remains vital for Balkan peace and security.

Stress must also be placed on the positive regional ramifications of an internationally recognized Kosovar state. For example, any potential threat from Belgrade will become ineffective and persistent Russian attempts to undermine the NATO mission or to forge some new anti-Western pacts with Serbia and Macedonia will be largely dissipated. Above all, a continuing NATO presence during the time that a national Kosova defence force is created will convince all military units in the surrounding region to desist from provocative actions.

Kosova's statehood could promote a solution to the wider "Albanian question" in the south Balkans. It would pacify the more radical Albanian demands for a larger state by setting permanent and unchangeable international borders while allowing the internationals to deal with Kosova as a country in its own right. During the next three years, corresponding with the term of the Bush administration, Kosova can establish all the elements and qualifications for statehood.

In many respects it can be argued that Kosova, as a more ethnically homogenous territory, is better prepared for single statehood than Bosnia-Herzegovina, another international protectorate. If the Serbian minority in Kosova receives appropriate physical and institutional protection, NATO ground troops will not have to patrol any "inter-entity" or "inter-community" lines, as the vast majority of Kosova's population is committed to the territorial integrity of Kosova.

Any further deterioration in Kosova, Macedonia, and Serbia will have a destabilizing effect throughout the west Balkans. While the worst-case-scenario is a spreading war, a more likely scenario is "insipid destabilization" characterized by deepening political instability, economic retardation, a freeze on foreign investment, and the further growth of illicit business and international criminal networks. This will estrange the Balkans from the European process and the trans-Atlantic structures. It will also guarantee a costly and permanent security headache for the Alliance that can become a bounty for Russian interests, international criminals, rogue states, fundamentalist extremists, and other anti-NATO and anti-European elements.

Institutional dependence on foreign factors may be crucial during various national emergencies such as the ones witnessed in Kosova in recent years, but this is not a viable substitute for "democratic security." Ultimately, the only legitimate and durable form of Balkan stability and reconstruction will have to be based on indigenous democratic development, the self-determination of new states, and voluntary international integration.

Europeanization or Americanization?

Although international institutional integration is the objective of most Balkan states and entities, the priorities and content of these processes differ between capitals. Two broad streams are now visible in the region: governments and political leaders who favour Europeanization and rapid attachment principally to existing European-based institutions, and those that are banking on a combined process of Europeanization and Americanization. The latter signifies, above all, membership of the NATO alliance, the maintenance of strong political and military ties with the United States, and a focus on American business investment.

The contrast between these two positions is most clearly on display in the differing approaches of Serbia (Yugoslavia) and Kosova toward their final political destination. The Serbian and Yugoslav authorities (particularly the latter) are more openly Euro-focused while Belgrade even seeks to achieve some equidistance or “balance” between Europe and Russia in its diplomatic, political, and security dimensions. Russia is still viewed in some high political circles as some kind of protector and counter-balance to unwelcome American influence.

In stark contrast, the Kosovar leadership of all political persuasions is basically Americanist in its political orientation. It focuses on developing close ties with Washington, largely as a counterweight to what are perceived to be unreliable European influences or as protection for the aspiring state against the threat of Serbian revanchism or further Russian interference in the Balkans. Central to this approach is a long-term Kosovar desire for NATO membership and a close partnership with the United States in all possible arenas.

Of course, the ultimate aim of European Union (EU) accession is considered to be important for guaranteeing economic prosperity and integration in the continental mainstream. But in the estimations of most Kosovars, security cannot currently be assured by Western Europe alone and it could even be endangered without intensive American involvement and leadership. Experiences over the past decade throughout the Balkans tend to confirm their scepticism.

In this context, an independent Kosova with a legitimate and authoritative government can make an important contribution to the U.S.-led anti-terrorism campaign. First, a sovereign Kosova government could combat links between organized crime and Middle Eastern terrorist penetration. Second, the Prishtina administration could directly participate in a range of regional anti-terrorism initiatives. In sum, the time is approaching for Kosova to become a subject and a participant in the international community and not an object of dependency and a bone of contention between Belgrade and the United Nations.

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