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# An Independent Kosovo: Understanding the Risks

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**T**ough choices did not end in the Balkans when Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic conceded to NATO on June 9, 1999. The NATO allies and states in the region are now confronting the thorny question of Kosovo's future. For Kosovo today is in limbo. The international community has hesitated to decide on Kosovo's eventual fate, leaving it administered by the United Nations but nominally part of Serbia. Although a European Union, NATO or UN protectorate over the province might serve as an interim measure, over time the world will have to confront the question of whether the Kosovars should rule themselves or not.

The importance of this issue is not limited to the Balkan region. The question of Kosovo's future highlights a broader dilemma on the creation of nation states. Critics of partition note that the new states often foster regional tension and war, possess little legitimacy and repress the new minorities that are created as a result of independence. Many neighboring states do not wish to see the creation of a new state, either for geopolitical reasons or for fear that this will inspire restless minorities in their own states. The United States has an ideological objection to creating states on the basis of ethnicity rather than on civic criteria. Yet partition has its proponents. After ethnic conflicts in particular, some scholars argue that lasting peace and democracy both are more likely if a state is partitioned rather than pieced together again.<sup>1</sup>

What would an independent Kosovo look like? What are the advantages to Kosovo's independence? What drawbacks would it have? What problems are likely

in its implementation? What policy should the other countries adopt as a result? These are the questions this essay addresses.

The creation of a new state from the province of Kosovo offers considerable advantages, in theory. The ethnic Albanians, who have long lived under Serbian domination, would no longer live in fear. After enduring Serbian killings, rape, and oppression, the Kosovars would at last be free from Serb repression. As the vast majority of Kosovars favor independence, formal separation from Serbia would also be a more democratic outcome.

Creating an independent Kosovo also has advantages for the United States and its allies. From a U.S. perspective, an "exit strategy" is possible. The United States and its NATO allies can leave when the Kosovars are able to defend them-

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selves. Perhaps, like the South Koreans, the Kuwaitis, and other U.S.-liberated peoples, continued U.S. assistance may be necessary, but Washington will not have to govern the liberated people and can shift much of the

burden of defense to them.

Perhaps the greatest argument for an independent Kosovo is that the likely alternatives appear much worse. Any strategy that preserves substantial Serbian control would, in essence, reward Belgrade for its brutal rule and subsequent ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. Half measures such as a protectorate or haven, while more palatable, would allow only limited political liberalization and might require a constant NATO military presence. More importantly, they would only delay the inevitable question: independence or integration?

Making Kosovo an independent state, however, is at best a mixed blessing. An independent Kosovo would anger U.S. allies, would generate human rights problems for the Serbs and other minorities in the new state, and might lead to further conflicts between Kosovo and Serbia. Feasibility is the biggest problem; the Kosovars have shown little political unity, and maintaining the new state would require a sustained diplomatic, economic and military effort. On balance, helping the Kosovars gain independence is the best long-term option, but it will fail if the United States and its allies shrink from its costs.

The remainder of this essay has four parts. The first part examines the shape of an independent Kosovo, noting possible configurations for its borders, its political status, and its demographic makeup. The second part notes the political, military, and economic requirements for such a state. Part three examines the difficult question of who might take power in an independent Kosovo. The fourth and final part offers recommendations for the United States and the other countries.

## What Would It Look Like?

In theory, the new state of Kosovo could take an almost infinite variety of forms, both geographically and politically. The first, and perhaps most important, question is the boundaries of the new state. Having the boundaries simply follow the old provincial frontiers is the most obvious answer. Serbia, however, would seek at least nominal influence over the northern and eastern portions of the province at least, as well as the areas that contain the Kosovo Polje battlefield and the Patriarchate of Pec, where the Serbian Orthodox Church had its historic seat. Without some Serbian control over these historic areas, any Kosovar government would have to guard constantly against Serbian irredentism. A partition that made concessions to Serbian sensitivities, however, would in essence be rewarding aggression.

Irredentism is a common historical problem in the aftermath of partition. The problem of disputed borders does not go away after an initial determination is made. India and Pakistan have warred over Kashmir repeatedly. The 1948 partition of Palestine led to a regional feeding frenzy, as neighboring powers—all claiming to act in the name of the Palestinians—tried to gain territory for themselves.<sup>2</sup> Disputes over borders sowed the seeds for a guerrilla war and for subsequent conventional wars.<sup>3</sup> Though the Serbs today appear completely defeated, the next generation of Serbs may revive their claim to Kosovo.

Kosovo's boundaries, however, are more set than those of many candidates for secession. The provincial boundaries of the former Yugoslavia, while hardly an exact fit to the region's demographic mix, nevertheless represent a reasonable starting point. Unlike Israel, the international community would not have to carve a Kosovar state out of whole cloth. In contrast to India, there are few demographically mixed parts of the country whose true affinity is in doubt.

With the boundaries decided, the next question concerns the political status of the new state. Under the UN resolution that ended the NATO war, Kosovo remains a part of Serbia. This status accords with U.S. preferences, as Washington has long opposed partition in principle, particularly if it leads to ethnically based states. Embracing the American ideal—that all peoples can live together regardless of racial, ethnic or sectarian divisions—Washington has consistently opposed the deliberate creation of ethnically homogenous states. Most recently in Bosnia, the United States repeatedly rejected calls to partition the country into Serb, Croat, and Muslim regions and instead sought a settlement that embraced all three groups. Many of the individuals who designed the post-Dayton multiethnic entity in Bosnia have also tried to block an Albanian-only state in Kosovo.

NATO could also run a *de facto* protectorate in Kosovo, perhaps in the name of the UN, the European Union, or other international body. A protectorate, of course, would be subject to conflicting pressures. Given the overwhelming

Kosovar preference for independence, a truly democratic protectorate then might vote itself out of existence, seeking statehood instead. Would NATO instead run an undemocratic protectorate? Moreover, maintaining the protectorate status would require maintaining a troop presence there as well.

As yet another variant, the United States could also guarantee a safe haven in Kosovo, avoiding any formal changes in sovereignty while limiting the Serbs' ability to use force in the area. As the United States discovered in northern Iraq, however, the limits to havens are profound. Defending against sudden attacks by local aggressors—such as the Iraqi seizure of Irbil in 1996—is difficult without the presence of ground forces.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, political development is delayed. The Kurds in northern Iraq repeatedly fought with one another, in part because no government structure emerged with real authority in the safe haven. Without a state and government of their own, the Kosovars will probably remain dependent on others to run their community, just as the Kurds were—with disastrous results in the end.

A third question concerns who would be a Kosovar. The conflict seems to have “hardened” the Kosovar Albanians' identity as a distinct people. Because of the bloodshed, creating a civic identity that embraces different ethnic groups appears impossible. Kosovar Albanians have no patience for Kosovar Serbs and other minorities. This problem is common after an ethnic civil war. As Chaim Kaufmann argues, “... in ethnic wars both hypernationalist mobilization rhetoric and real atrocities harden ethnic identities to the point that cross-ethnic political appeals are unlikely to be made and even less likely to be heard.”<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, Kosovar militants have systematically harassed the Serbs who remained in the country after Yugoslav forces departed, using violence to encourage the entire community to depart.

Indeed, the problem goes beyond the Serbs. The experience of the Roma (Gypsies) and other minorities is suggestive. Caught in a trap common to weak communities everywhere, the Roma stand accused of collaborating with Serb forces. Kosovar militants have harassed the Roma, creating an atmosphere of hate and violence that is intended to encourage them to emigrate. Kosovar Albanians also have turned on the 17,000 Goranis, who are Muslims and Slavs and live in the mountains of southern Kosovo, using violence to encourage them to leave.<sup>6</sup>

Here the Bosnia experience should give us pause. A study by the International Crisis Group suggests that Western efforts over the last four years to encourage the development of a multiethnic Bosnia have failed.<sup>7</sup> Millions of dollars in reconstruction aid and thousands of soldiers have not been able to bring Bosnia's communities together. The trust necessary for democracy to flourish is missing, as the legacy of the war is very much alive. If the NATO troops depart, peace may end. Kosovo's experience is likely to be similar. Kosovo's communities will not come together again, and any independent successor state is not likely to respect the rights of non-Albanian communities.

## What Would It Take?

Even if contentious questions regarding the borders, political status and people of the new state can be decided, an independent Kosovo still could not stand on its own without tremendous outside military, diplomatic, and economic support.

The diplomatic requirements are daunting. Many states in Europe, and around the world in general, oppose the precedent of creating new states. These countries, as well as other major powers with restive minorities, fear the precedent that a partitioned Serbia creates: would NATO support the Chechens, the Kurds in Turkey, the Hungarians in Romania, the Uighur Muslims in China, or the Albanians in Macedonia if they sought their own states? Although these conflicts seem remote to most U.S. observers, fearful foreign leaders would point out that Kosovo, too, was remote at one time. Thus, many states would seek to preserve the fiction of Serbia's control over Kosovo, keeping it a *de facto* protectorate rather than recognizing it as an independent state.

The goodwill of Kosovo's European neighbors matters tremendously in whether the new nation would succeed. As Macedonia discovered after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, international recognition is not bestowed immediately or universally, and at times the most important states may withhold their markets and close their borders. Macedonia's economy remained in a shambles because of Greece's refusal to recognize the new state for many years, creating the potential there for considerable instability. Kosovo, a poorer state, would need foreign assistance even more.

The impact of alliance discord goes beyond the immediate question of what is to be done in Kosovo. One of the Clinton administration's rationalizations for involvement in Kosovo, and for involvement in the Balkans in general, is to preserve NATO credibility. Open and sustained discord among alliance members, however, would suggest that NATO is not united about its role in the post-Cold War world. No one wants to destroy the alliance in order to save it. To save alliance unity, the Clinton administration, and the NATO allies more broadly, may prefer a fig leaf of political continuity, avoiding words such as "independence" and "self-determination."

Political recognition is not enough. The economic dimensions of Kosovo independence are also daunting. Even before the war, the region was Europe's basket case. Serbian pillaging and the systematic devastation of many Albanian villages have turned the region into a wasteland; even with massive aid organization assistance, many Kosovars lacked adequate shelter this winter.<sup>8</sup> Many of the Kosovars who have returned are poor and relatively unskilled. They may have to rely on international aid for years until they regained their pre-war standard of living.

An aid-dependent economy, however, carries its own perils. The large military and aid organization presence in Kosovo runs the risk of overwhelming traditional sources of income. Past relief efforts have often overwhelmed local

economies: an influx of food has made local crops worthless, donated clothes have destroyed local textile manufacturing, and so on. Thus, the aid presence designed to help the Kosovars can prove detrimental, making them dependent on the international community for subsistence.

The military tasks also are considerable, and would require a substantial police and military force for many years. The formal recognition of even a rump Kosovar state might lead to an enduring bitterness among Serbs, possibly leading to war in the decades to come. Although several partitions have occurred without subsequent violence, the track record should lead the world to proceed cautiously. The partitions of India and Palestine—to say nothing of the disintegration of much of the former Yugoslavia—led to lasting hatred that contributed to subsequent interstate wars among successor states.

Securing the borders against any Serbian attacks would require several thousand troops, supported by regular intelligence gathering on Serbian deployments. If the Serbs mass near the border, these troops would need to be further reinforced. To prevent a sudden Serbian attack, NATO may also have to enforce “no fly” and “no drive” zones, comparable to what is done now in Iraq, in order to stop the Serbs from exploiting their advantage in heavy forces. Any force would also have to protect refugees from Serb guerrillas and from one another. Until the Kosovars can defend themselves, returning refugees could be at the mercy of lightly armed bands of Serb partisans. Such light forces are difficult to detect without units on the ground, making it difficult to reduce the actual NATO presence in Kosovo to air power or remote basing.

The threat from Albania itself represents another, quite different, danger. Although most Albanians staunchly supported their ethnic kinsmen during the war with Kosovo, the Albanian mafia has now made tremendous inroads into the new state. The growth in the mafia’s influence across borders raises the possibility that Kosovo, too, will sink into the morass of crime and chaos that has engulfed its Albanian neighbor.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the biggest danger to Kosovar security at the moment is internal, not external. Banditry has grown due to the absence of central government and the ready availability of small arms. Refugees are robbed and reconstruction aid stolen. Already, the United Nations is seeking to more than triple the number of UN police deployed to Kosovo.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, a Kosovar police and military force must be trained in order to defend the new state and ensure order. The nucleus of this force could be the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and other fighters for independence, but even if NATO assists the Kosovar in defending against a major invasion, several thousand troops and hundreds of police would be needed to secure borders and to fight crime and banditry. Given that this force will take years to develop, and that an independent Kosovo will face a continued threat from its Serbian neighbor, NATO may have to maintain sufficient forces to deter Serbia in the region.

Despite these many difficulties, true security is more likely in an independent Kosovo than in any of the likely alternatives. An independent Kosovo would have delineated borders and, given the geography of the region, highly defensible ones. Over time, the Kosovars could be trained to defend themselves. Refusing to take such steps, however, would leave the Kosovars vulnerable when NATO eventually departs.

Domestic support in the United States and other leading allies for a sustained diplomatic, economic, and military commitment to an independent Kosovo is a final concern. The success of an independent Kosovo, of course, is hardly a vital interest for the United States. At war, the Balkans might be a threat to the stability of Europe. At peace—even a brutal, corrupt, and chaotic one—this already questionable threat diminishes. If deployment lasts years, critics in Congress and in allied capitals may grow louder. Moreover, if the new Kosovo government is corrupt, autocratic, and brutal—as it may well be even with U.S. and allied assistance—many Americans will question why it deserves U.S. support. Sustaining U.S. support in the years to come will be challenge for policy makers.

### **Who Will Rule?**

For peace and stability to come to Kosovo, the KLA and other Kosovar opposition factions must work together. Civil war among the victors is a common outcome in partitioned states: warring factions, united only in their hatred for the oppressor state, turn their guns on each other. William Butler Yeats penned his much-quoted lines, “things fall apart, the center will not hold” in response to the bloody Irish civil war that followed independence. In Israel, the Baltic States, and other successful partitions, in contrast, strong political leadership—which predated actual independence—helped limit any fratricide. Without such unity Kosovo could become a failed state.

The signs so far are discouraging. The KLA is the strongest and best-organized of the opposition groups, but some of its leaders are involved in narcotics trafficking or support unsavory ideologies. The various KLA factions do not understand what true democracy entails, let alone support it.<sup>11</sup> Despite the popularity it built up during its resistance to the Serbs, the KLA’s brutality and corruption upon independence has already alienated many Kosovars. Moderate Albanians—those who call for a freer government or who oppose the brutalization of Serbs and Roma—are often harassed. Many of the guerrillas appear to have become bandits, using the weapons and organization developed in the anti-Serb struggle to rob humanitarian supplies and extort from legitimate merchants.

The ideal is to foster a more democratic and gentler alternative to the KLA, but the former guerrilla organization will not go quietly. The KLA is losing popularity, but there is no force to take their place. Although alternative leaders to the KLA such as Ibrahim Rugova, who from 1992 until the recent war acted as a

spokesman for and de facto leader of Kosovar's Albanians, appear more open to democracy, they cannot match the paramilitary network of the KLA. Indeed, Rugova in general has embraced non-violent approaches: a commendable moral route, but one of dubious effectiveness when confronting ruthless thugs.

Moreover, as the above discussion suggests, an independent Kosovo will not end repression and discrimination; it will simply reverse the names of the victims and their persecutors. Roughly 100,000 Serbs lived in Kosovo before the bombing campaign began. Perhaps 50,000 remained in the province after Milosevic capitulated. Thousands have left since then, and if the Kosovar Albanians gained power, there is a strong likelihood that they would turn on any remaining Serbs.

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At a minimum, Kosovar Serbs—and probably Roma and other minorities—would be excluded from power in the new government. The new government might even uproot

them from their homes and drive them to Serbia. Would NATO turn a blind eye to this “transfer”—as it did when the Croats administered a similar rough justice in Serb-populated areas they conquered—or will it try to defend the Serbs in the new state? Either choice would be unpleasant.

Building a democracy in the new state is likely to be difficult. Although social scientists have not developed a hard and fast recipe for the success of democratization, many of the common ingredients appear to be missing in the case of Kosovo. There is no democratic tradition in the region upon which to build, and socio-economic development levels are low. It is difficult to create a democracy when one group or faction fears that it might never return to power if it gives up power—a fear that is quite real in Kosovo given the bloody nature of politics there. The danger, or even likelihood, of reprisals when power shifts hands from one group to another compounds this mistrust.<sup>12</sup>

Democratization in such circumstances is not impossible, but it will require sustained outside support as well as the commitment of Kosovo's key groups. Currently, both elements are lacking. Yet the best hope for democratization remains an independent Kosovo rather than any of the alternatives. Although democratic institutions could be developed during a UN or NATO protectorate, the Kosovars must take responsibility for their own political fate if democracy is to have any meaning. Moreover, as the Bosnian experience suggests, a multiethnic Kosovo is a pipe dream. Even though any Kosovar democracy would hardly embrace the region's new minorities, it would nevertheless represent a better system than any alternatives, which would also exclude the Serbs, Roma, and other non-Albanian peoples.

## What Is to Be Done?

Supporting Kosovar independence is an idea with many merits whose time has not yet come—unless the United States and other countries are prepared to tackle the immense problems that are likely to occur.

On paper, the advantages, in general, outweigh the disadvantages. An independent Kosovo would make the Kosovars safer and more likely to live in a democratic system. Moreover, at some point the Kosovars must be able to assume responsibility for their own security if the international community seeks an “exit strategy.” Perhaps equally important, there are few sensible long-term policy alternatives to the creation of an independent Kosovo. Both the protectorate and safe haven options offer no long-term solution. Thus, despite its many problems, it remains the best of several bad options.

Feasibility is the rub. An independent Kosovo could be created and sustained, but only with massive outside support. Public support in NATO countries for a large troop presence might decline quickly if the deployment goes on without end. Perhaps most dauntingly, many U.S. allies would oppose it if it led to Kosovo independence. A massive, long-term humanitarian intervention that alienates several allies would be a costly intervention indeed.

If it is to be done, the true nature of an independent Kosovo would have to be disguised. Diminishing Kosovo’s political status may make the new state palatable to U.S. allies and other major powers, particularly those concerned with the precedent for their own minorities. Striking this balance will be difficult. How do you arm and train a Kosovar army, aid Kosovo’s economy and foster a democratic, unified polity while claiming that this rump state is not independent and is indeed truly part of Serbia?

The United States and its allies also must recognize their commitment to the new minorities of Kosovo. Creating a new state on the grounds of ethnic discrimination would be tremendously hypocritical if it engendered yet another bout of ethnic cleansing, even if the numbers are far smaller. This entails three difficult and unwelcome tasks. First, NATO forces must formally accept the task of transferring Serbs to Serbia proper. Protecting the Serbs is sensible in the short term, but NATO cannot be responsible for their security indefinitely. The Kosovar Albanians’ bitterness runs too deep to expect reconciliation to occur. Creating a safe corridor for refugees is a necessary step. Second, the West also has an obligation to the Roma, who have no place where they can return in safety. The bitterness toward the Roma is not as deep as it is toward the Serbs, holding out the possibility that providing security in the short term will allow time for passions to cool. The West should also consider offering sanctuary to more Roma as necessary. Third, Washington should take every effort to support democracy and civil society in the region. Strengthening more democratic forces may help

them prevail over the KLA.

Such steps are difficult, but they are necessary to put Kosovo on the right path toward independence. Half-measures might lead to the worst result of all. If allied infighting or a drop in domestic support led NATO to back away from an independent Kosovo, the new state might be left impoverished, defenseless and without any government. It would then be easy prey to Serbia or to internal unrest.

To move Kosovo toward independence the United States must also change its own mindset. At Dayton, and again at Rambouillet, Washington opposed the deliberate creation of ethnically homogenous states. Such a stance is in keeping with American ideals, but not the world's reality. Particularly in the aftermath of a brutal communal conflict, ethnic adversaries do not forgive and forget. If we seek to build a peaceful state, as well as a more democratic one, we must recognize this reality. 

## Notes

1. For works supporting partition after an ethnic conflict, see Chaim Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," *International Security* 20 no. 4 (Spring 1996) 136–175 and Chaim Kaufmann, "When All Else Fails: Ethnic Population Transfers and Partitions in the Twentieth Century," *International Security* 23 no. 2 (Fall 1998) 120–156. For a critique of Kaufmann, see Daniel L. Byman, "Divided They Stand," *Security Studies* 7 no. 1 (Autumn 1997) 1–29. Works critical of partition include Amitai Etzioni, "The Evils of Self-Determination," *Foreign Policy* no. 89 (Winter 1992/93) 21–35 and Robert Schaeffer, *Warpaths: The Politics of Partition* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990).

2. See Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) for an account of the 1948 struggles.

3. See Benny Morris, *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

4. For more on U.S. efforts in northern Iraq, see Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Matthew Waxman, "Coercing Saddam Hussein: Lessons from the Past," *Survival* (Autumn 1998) 127–152.

5. Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars," 137.

6. Carlotta Gall, "Gypsies and Others Said to Draw Kosovar Fury," *New York Times*, November 5, 1999: A18.

7. Ivo Daalder and Michael Froman, "Dayton's Incomplete Peace," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 1999) 106–113; Jane Perlez, "Bosnia Has Achieved Peace but Not Ethnic Unity, A Study Finds," *New York Times*, October 31, 1999: 5.

8. See Carlotta Gall, "Kosovo Aid Groups Fall Short As Winter Nears," *New York Times*, November 2, 1999 (electronic version.)

9. See Frank Cilluffo and George Salmoiraghi, "And the Winner Is—The Albanian Mafia," *Washington Quarterly* 22 no. 4 (Autumn 1999) 21–25.

10. "Annan: Kosovo Needs Policing," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 29, 1999 (electronic version).

11. See Chris Hedges, "Kosovo's Next Masters?" *Foreign Affairs* 78 no. 3 (May/June 1999) 28.

12. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 26–34. For more on this point, see Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993) 211–231 and Daniel Byman and Stephen Van Evera, “Why They Fight: Hypotheses on the Causes of Contemporary Deadly Conflict,” *Security Studies* 7 no. 3 (Spring 1998) 48.