

The Lessons of Kosovo

Testimony of Zbigniew Brzezinski

Counselor and Board of Trustees Member
Center for Strategic & International Studies

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One of the important lessons of Kosovo pertains to our relationship with Russia. The bottom line is that cooperation with Russia is desirable, can be quite useful, but that the current Russian government is not trustworthy.

Let me speak to this issue in more detail, specifically reviewing the Russian conduct during the Kosovo conflict, and noting particularly some compelling circumstantial evidence indicating Russian-Serbian collusion.

Russia's policy toward the Kosovo crisis can best be understood in reference to three phases. The first was largely visceral and vitriolic. It involved an emotional and almost instinctive solidarity with Milosevic, violent denunciations of the bombing, and promises of support for the Serbs. Even prior to the bombing, on February 3, the Duma called for aid to Yugoslavia if NATO strikes. When the air attack began, Russia sought a UN condemnation, and then Prime Minister Yevgeny M. Primakov attempted to split off the Germans with a peace proposal that was much more favorable to Milosevic than NATO's.

During this initial phase there were persistent rumors that a "volunteer" Russian contingent had gone to fight on the Serb side. Western intelligence sources also reported that some Russian military equipment was delivered to the Serbs, and that Russian military advice was provided. The overall Russian approach was well summarized on March 25 by a leading Moscow newspaper *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. The paper hopefully declared that the Kosovo action was initiating "the collapse of the U.S. global empire," and that it was in Russia's interest to let "the United States and NATO with its demented West and East European members bog down as deep as possible in a Balkan war."

The second phase came into play once it dawned on the Kremlin that the NATO alliance would neither split nor quit. Russia then somewhat shifted its stand and sought to be part of the Western decision-making process. The chosen avenue was the G-8 foreign ministers' consultations, where former Prime Minister Viktor S. Chernomyrdin, as his country's special envoy on the Balkans, assumed a highly visible role in seeking to convince NATO that it should soften its stand if it wished a "political" solution. By late May this process assumed the form of a two-headed effort: Chernomyrdin and Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari took the lead on behalf of the G-8 in discussions with Milosevic. However, Chernomyrdin at times also met with Milosevic alone while Russia's public pronouncements became increasingly strident.

On May 27 Chernomyrdin published an altogether hysterical op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*. He asserted that "the United States lost its moral right to be regarded as the leader of the free democratic world when its bombs shattered the ideals of liberty and democracy in Yugoslavia," called for the payment of reparations to Yugoslavia, and warned that he would urge

President Boris N. Yeltsin to freeze all American-Russian relations unless the bombing stopped. The next day he met alone with Milosevic.

Two days after that extraordinary outburst the third and critical phase of Russia's policy was set in motion. Chernomyrdin let it be known that he was pleased with his discussions with Milosevic. On June 2 Russian TV reported that Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin "have brought not one but two different plans to Belgrade," (*italics added*) and added that "Moscow is ... talking about a virtual partition of Kosovo," with "a Russian contingent" under separate Russian command in control of northeast Kosovo.

The very next day, June 3, Milosevic accepted NATO's demand for the withdrawal of all Serb forces, while Chernomyrdin in an interview with Russian TV stated that "at Yugoslavia's special request, Russia will also be represented" in the occupying peacekeeping force.

Events then unfolded quite rapidly. On June 4 the Russian Foreign and Defense Ministers held a closed meeting with the Duma to reassure it that Yugoslavia had not been betrayed. On June 5 Russian officers did not show up at the first scheduled encounter between NATO and Serbian officers, held to coordinate the Serb withdrawal that was to take place promptly within a week. Between June 5 and 7, Serbian officers continued stalling in the negotiations, and on June 10 NATO agreed to a delay in the Serb withdrawal.

The same day, June 10, a Russian military contingent left its position in Bosnia, and -- benefiting from full Serbian cooperation -- moved swiftly through Serbia toward Kosovo. As this was happening, the Russian government reassured U.S. Vice President Al Gore that the Russian contingent would not enter Kosovo. The White House then disallowed the NATO commander's plan to execute a pre-emptive seizure of Pristina, Kosovo's capital. On June 12 at 1:30 AM the Russian forces entered Pristina and, with Serbian military assistance, took up defensive positions at the airport, barring the later arriving NATO forces. (According to some intelligence reports, the Russians secured some military equipment there that they had previously provided to the Serbs.)

A detailed account in the *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* of June 14 tells the rest of the story -- both what happened and what did not happen. Crowding over the Russian military coup and over Serbian crowds in Pristina burning U.S. and British flags, the paper said that as of June 12 a contingent of 2,500 Russian paratroopers was ready to be flown into Pristina, and that "it has already been decided that Russia will have its own sector" in Kosovo. The report noted that although Hungary had denied Russia its air space, "this is not a problem -- Bulgaria, for example, gave the go-ahead. Our planes could make a detour -- from the Russian coast over the Black Sea and Bulgaria straight to Kosovo." In other words, Kosovo would be partitioned by a unilateral fiat, whether NATO liked it or not.

Indeed, on June 12, the Bulgarian government was confronted with a request from Moscow for overflight rights for six Russian planes, allegedly to deliver supplies to the Russian force in Pristina. The Bulgarians were even informed that the first plane was to take off at dawn, hours before the delivery of the request.

Alas for the Kremlin, things did not turn out so. Not only Hungary, a NATO member, but Bulgaria and Romania refused access to their air space, and the Kremlin prudently decided that it could not run the risk of having its air transports forced down. As a result, the Russian contingent in Pristina was left stranded. In the meantime the Serbian forces, by then in full retreat on exposed roads, could not reverse course without facing enormous vulnerability to resumed air attacks. For a week the Kremlin continued to insist on a separate sector, but on June 18 Russia reluctantly agreed to have its troops dispersed within the U.S., French and German zones.

It thus appears that Milosevic's sudden acquiescence was part of a desperate double-cross attempt engineered jointly by Belgrade and Moscow. Once Moscow realized that it could not sway the West, it used its role as the West's co-mediator to secretly fashion, with Milosevic, a pre-emptive maneuver masked as an accommodation. The collusion was contrived to outwit NATO by salvaging for Serbia -- under Russia's protection -- the northeastern part of partitioned Kosovo, and to gain for frustrated Russia a significant boost in international prestige. The attempt faltered because three small European countries had the gumption to defy Moscow, and NATO remained firm in not agreeing to a separate Russian sector. Under these circumstances, the double-cross did not work.

In conclusion, let me make a more general comment. Russia today is in the midst of political, economic, and social crisis. The Russian people want security, stability, and eventually prosperity. They do not share their political elite's preoccupation with international prestige and they do not support its military adventurism, be it now in Chechnya or earlier in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the present Russian leadership -- every member of which would feel quite at home in a Soviet government if the Soviet Union still existed -- is driven by nostalgia for global power status and by resentment against America's special international standing. That motivation not only explains the Russian conduct in Kosovo but it provides a key lesson that should be drawn from that particular experience: namely, that Russia is not yet a reliable partner.