



KOSOVO

A TEST FOR U.S. STRATEGY

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During two decades of intense conflict between Serbs and Albanians over Kosovo, the disputed territory has also assumed strategic significance for Washington. The United States has invested substantial diplomatic, political, and military capital in the region and mobilized NATO in its first combat operation and subsequent peacekeeping mission. Moreover, the outcome of decisions on Kosovo's final status will have long-term implications for America's relations with both allies and adversaries.

The chasm between Prishtina (the capital of Kosovo) and Belgrade cannot be bridged through negotiations. While the former remains adamant about independence, the latter will not surrender its sovereignty over the territory. More than 90 percent of Kosovo's population support independence, while the democratically elected government in Prishtina points out that Serbia de facto lost the territory when it attempted to slaughter and expel two million Albanians and was ousted from Kosovo by NATO forces in 1999.

The key strategic challenge in the Balkans is the effectiveness of U.S. leadership in determining Kosovo's final status as a legitimate state in line with the will of



its citizens. Linked with this is the assurance of transatlantic solidarity in implementing such a decision, similar to the unity that was displayed when NATO intervened in Kosovo to prevent genocide.

Kosovo's progress as a functioning state is vital for regional security and European stability. The current status quo or proposals to return Kosovo to Serbian jurisdiction are untenable solutions. Without independent status, political stability and economic development will be endangered and rising regional tensions could impede EU integration for the entire western Balkans. Most of Kosovo's neighbors, other than Serbia, understand the necessity of statehood supervised by NATO and the EU so that the region can move beyond the era of ethno-territorial conflict.

Kosovo is also a test for postwar reconstruction and effective state-building. If, after a decade of direct Western involvement, this project were to fail in an aspiring state that is strongly pro-American and pro-European, then the chances for success in Iraq or Afghanistan will look distinctly dim.

The settling of Kosovo, where the majority of the population is Muslim, also remains significant for Washington's relations with the wider Islamic world. The denial of independence for Kosovo could be widely interpreted as an anti-Islamic decision and provide fresh ammunition for radicals. By contrast, Kosovo's statehood would be an important public relations success by demonstrating the United States' commitment to democratic values regardless of religious tradition.

Two major impediments remain with regard to final decisions on Kosovo's statehood—Russian resistance and European disunity. Moscow views Kosovo as a valuable boost for its global ambitions and has adeptly exploited divisions among EU capitals to its advantage. In denying Kosovo's statehood by threatening to veto the Western plan for independence in the United Nations Security Council, the Kremlin can claim Russia is a major defender of multilateralism and international legality. Of course, Moscow would not apply the same principle to territories close to its borders, where it encourages pro-Russian and anti-Western separatism.

Kosovo forms part of a wider strategic agenda enabling Russia to elevate its international position, interject itself in Balkan developments, promote splits within the EU, aggravate weaknesses in Western decisionmaking, and claim to counterbalance U.S. hegemony.

For the Putin administration, the birth of new pro-American countries presents a long-term threat to Russia's strategic designs. Democratic states invariably seek membership in NATO and the EU to consolidate the reform process and provide permanent security and U.S. engagement. For Moscow, such steps undercut its influences in neighboring countries and retard its ambitions as a revived superpower.

Russia capitalizes on the fact that Washington is seeking to rebuild its alliances and does not want to be depicted again as a unilateralist and hegemon. Hence, the United States is hesitant to bypass the UN Security Council in decisions about Kosovo. At the same time, several EU governments avoid acting outside the UN framework as that could undermine their own global influence and provide further unwelcome precedents.

With the deadline for current negotiations between Belgrade and Prishtina due to expire in December 2007, the White House needs to decide what strategic interests it is willing to defend over Kosovo. Unless the Alliance stands firm and united in implementing a credible plan for Kosovo's independence under a NATO and EU umbrella, Russia will increasingly benefit from Western indecision and from escalating instability inside the EU's doorstep. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council will remain paralyzed by the clique of ex-KGB officers who now control Russia. ■

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