

Outside View: Bush's failed Kosovo policy

Пише: Robert M. Hayden
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PITTSBURGH, March 20 (UPI) -- Fighting in northern Kosovo this week between Serbs and NATO-led troops shows that the independence engineered by the Bush administration for the breakaway Balkan province is not going according to plan.

When U.S. officials encouraged the unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia by Kosovo's Albanians Feb. 17, we were told that an EU mission would replace the United Nations in Kosovo, and everyone would then build a multiethnic, democratic society with respect for rights of the Serbs, a minority in the province as a whole.

That is not happening. The Serbs of northern Kosovo, where they are a majority, believe that they have little future in an Albanian state. They have resisted its imposition on them, mainly through peaceful means, except for destroying the control posts on the border that they do not recognize despite U.S. insistence that they must.

The protests turned violent when U.N. police with NATO backing forcibly broke up the peaceful occupation of a government building Monday -- and the ensuing fighting left hundreds of Serb civilians, U.N. police and NATO-led troops injured, some critically, and one U.N. policeman dead.

The EU mission cannot enter northern Kosovo and the United Nations was forced to pull out, leaving NATO troops to guard a border that has no status under international law and that is rejected by the people living on both sides of it.

The problem is not that "Serb nationalists" are resisting "the West," as it is put by those U.S. journalists who honor the First Amendment by parroting the State Department, but rather that the Bush administration has attempted to force a military solution to a political problem, in violation of the U.N. charter and the most basic principles of international law.

This is not the first time they have done so, of course, and if the scale of violence in Kosovo is less than that in Iraq, the possibility of destabilizing another region -- this time the Balkans -- is just as grave.

Kosovo really was the birthplace of the Serbian nation 800 years ago, and was included in Serbia after the Ottoman Empire was forced out in 1912. But Albanians also always lived there. Demographic changes in the 20th century (some caused by ethnic cleansing of Serbs from the region during Italian occupation in World War II) led to a heavy ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo by the 1980s, and Serbia's continued control over the province required a police state.

But the Serbian hand in Kosovo was no heavier than Britain's rule of Ireland in the decades before Irish independence in 1923, or Israel's occupation of the West Bank until the Oslo accords, or Turkey's continuing control over the Kurdish-majority regions in eastern Turkey. And these situations usually end when the governing state realizes

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that maintaining control is too costly, in financial, political and even moral terms, and seeks a deal to permit withdrawal.

Such a deal could have been reached with Serbia, but neither the Clinton administration nor that of George W. Bush wanted one. Both saw Kosovo as an opportunity for isolating Russia from the Balkans for the first time in more than a century, since Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, never one of the world's great strategic thinkers, had chosen to ally Serbia with, first, the Soviet Union and then with Russia. Further, with the apparent end of the Cold War, NATO needed a job, since the alliance had been formed to keep the Soviet Union from invading West Germany. Attacking Serbia to "liberate" Kosovo was meant to transform NATO from a purely defensive alliance into a more proactive or offensive one, contrary to NATO's own charter, but responding to a certain realpolitik.

The most basic principle of international law since World War II, however, and the most fundamental principle of the U.N. system, is that aggressive wars are banned -- that was the justification the first George Bush gave for attacking Iraq after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and the whole world except for North Korea agreed with him. But attacking a sovereign state in order to occupy part of its territory and ultimately change its borders is

another story. Unfortunately for international law and international stability, NATO's action against Serbia in 1999 was just such a war of aggression, waged without U.N. Security Council approval.

And it did not go as planned. As the State Department itself admitted in May 1999, once NATO attacked Serbia, Milosevic's forces turned what had been "selective targeting of towns and regions" suspected of armed Albanian resistance into a campaign to ethnically cleanse Kosovo of Albanians. This is worth repeating -- the 1999 NATO war against Serbia was not in response to ethnic cleansing but rather provoked it, which then made it necessary to carry the war on for three months in order to reverse the consequences of the NATO attacks themselves.

The 1999 war only ended when the Clinton administration went back to the U.N. Security Council that it had ignored in starting it. The resulting U.N. resolution recognized Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo. Since Russia does not feel obligated to assist the United States in isolating it from the Balkans, that resolution cannot be changed.

And rather than try to negotiate a solution, the Bush administration chose to try to impose one, in part to show the weakness of Russia.

But Kosovo is not recognized by most countries, or by the United Nations, or even by the European Union. Kosovo cannot achieve true independence unless and until the Kosovo Albanians reach a deal with Serbia -- exactly the course of action that the Bush administration has made more complicated than ever. Meanwhile, the whole system of international law is threatened, as is local peace in Kosovo and stability in the Balkans. Kosovo can be settled if the Bush administration returns to the United Nations and engages in honest negotiation with the Serbs and the Russians. More fundamentally, stability in the international system can only

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be restored when the United States once again honors the fundamental principles of international law that it violated by attacking Iraq in 2003, and in recognizing Kosovo in 2008.

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