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A Change of Plan?

by Marisa Morrison

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On his recent trip to Serbia, *National Interest* editor Nick Gvosdev interviewed several Serbian officials puzzled by the United States' outdated policy towards the Balkans. "Do they [in the United States] know that Slobodan Milosevic is dead?" one Serbian policymaker asked Gvosdev. Indeed, since the former Serbian president died in March 2006, U.S. and European leaders should rethink their approach to Kosovo, Serbia's UN-administered province.

Yesterday at the Nixon Center, Gvosdev and Andrew Parasiliti, vice president of Barbour Griffith and Rogers International, discussed the UN-backed proposal regarding the final status of Kosovo—and why it is inadequate. This proposal, put forward by Martti Ahtisaari, the UN Secretary-General's special envoy for Kosovo, calls for the province to become independent of Serbia.

While the area holds great cultural and historical significance for Serbs, approximately nine-tenths of Kosovo's population is ethnically Albanian. Simmering ethnic tensions eventually led to armed conflict between Albanian separatists and Milosevic's troops in the late 1990s. Eventually, NATO undertook a bombing campaign to force Milosevic—who had been accused of waging a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo—to accept a NATO-crafted peace agreement. After Milosevic agreed to the conditions of the peace plan, the United Nations placed Kosovo under the organization's control.

In 2000, street protests forced Milosevic out of office; less than two years later, he would stand trial for war crimes before a UN tribunal.

Gvosdev and Parasiliti both noted the Serbia of today bears little resemblance to its Milosevic-era antecedent. Parasiliti described the democratic transition in Serbia since the Milosevic period as a political "success story" that is not often fully understood or appreciated in Washington. Serbia is now headed by devoted democrats who were once Milosevic's opponents. This new generation of leaders is "not burdened with some of the baggage of the past", Gvosdev observed. The recently formed coalition government, he added, has a "mandate to move beyond survival."

The Serbian government has recently attempted to reach out to neighboring states, including Croatia, and

has formulated a “good neighbor” plan to guide its dealings with other Balkan countries. Serbia’s leaders even understand that “the status quo on Kosovo is untenable” , Gvosdev said.

Although Serbia is a functioning democracy with reformist leaders, it was effectively excluded from participating in the formulation of the Ahtisaari Plan. The Serbian officials that spoke with Gvosdev echoed this sentiment: Many saw the negotiations that preceded the plan’s announcement as a “fig leaf” to conceal Ahtisaari’s unwavering commitment to an independent Kosovo. Even at the outset of the negotiations, Serbians felt that their opinions were not being taken into account. According to Gvosdev’s Serbian sources, approximately one-half of the Ahtisaari Plan’s annexes were not broached at the Vienna talks between Serbian and Kosovar Albanian officials.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon’s treatment of the Kosovo issue reinforced Serbian concerns that their grievances had fallen on deaf ears. When a group of Serbian policymakers visited the secretary general, they found him to be uninterested in and uninformed about the Kosovo issue. These officials perceived that Ban—who met with them for 15 minutes, instead of the planned two hours—regarded the issue as a “done deal.” Such indifference appeared especially shocking to the Serbs in light of Ban’s predecessor’s hands-on approach to settling territorial disputes. While attempting to resolve the conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, for example, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan took an active role in the negotiations process and crafted five versions of his Annan Plan.

In its current form, the Ahtisaari Plan may actually stoke—rather than solve—conflict in the region. Gvosdev and Parasiliti noted that stability in the Balkans depends on stability in Serbia, and the plan for Kosovo will only add fuel to the fire of Serbian radicalism. Since it overrides the Serbian constitution and the expressed position of the Serbian National Assembly, the Ahtisaari Plan would make it more difficult for the present Serbian government to retain its democratic legitimacy.

Parasiliti stated that an independent Kosovo would produce a host of other problems. Corruption, a high unemployment rate, and the presence of organized crime and human trafficking hurt Kosovo’s chances for economic and political development; if the province were to become independent, Parasiliti said, it would begin life as a failed or failing state. Second, Kosovo’s independence would set an unwelcome precedent, both in the Balkans and at the United Nations, where a sovereign, democratic nation would be forced to cede territory against its will. Third, since Russia opposes the Ahtisaari Plan’s recommendations, a Security Council spat over the plan may further strain Russia’s relations with the EU and the United States, the plan’s proponents, at a time when the United States needs Russian support for a UN Security Council resolution imposing tougher sanctions on Iran.

Finally, Kosovar Serbs, who make up about 10 percent of Kosovo’s population, already face intimidation and violence; they fear that if Kosovo were independent, their rights will not be protected—especially not by the Americans or Europeans, who are hesitant to put their soldiers in harm’s way.

It is not surprising, then, that Serbs have become skeptical about the willingness of the United States or the

EU to ensure the region's stability—with troops, if necessary—if the Ahtisaari Plan is implemented. One of Gvosdev's interview subjects suggested that any U.S. intervention in the region would be a “repeat of ‘mission accomplished’”, when George W. Bush prematurely declared victory in Iraq in 2003. Gvosdev noted that this lack of confidence was especially striking, since the current crop of Serbian leaders is “very pro-Euro-Atlantic.” The possibility of EU membership for the Balkan states, including Serbia, would help to shore up the region's flagging faith in the West, Gvosdev said. Better yet, bringing the Balkans into the EU's domain would help to stabilize the volatile region.

The prospects for the Balkans would certainly be brighter if the international community were to design a lasting solution to the Kosovo question. Gvosdev and Parasiliti agreed that such a solution will be found only if Serbia is made a stakeholder in the negotiations process. Parasiliti suggested that more international attention should be given to the Serbian proposal for autonomy for Kosovo and for continued, direct negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo with international mediation. While Gvosdev admitted that selling autonomy to the Kosovar Albanians, who strongly favor independence, would be a challenge that “no one should minimize”, he noted that the correct incentives might sway Kosovar Albanian opinion.

Parasiliti argued that restarting negotiations would be a crucial step towards a durable solution to Kosovo's final status. He also warned that a false sense of urgency is driving the Security Council's negotiations on Kosovo. “There is not a current crisis in the Balkans that can be resolved by an imposed decision leading to Kosovo's independence”, he said; “Let's not create a crisis by imposing such a decision now.”

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