



Remember America's Great Kosovo Ally? Never Mind the War Crimes!

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The Trump administration, in the personality of Richard Grenell, former U.S. ambassador to Germany, has become intricately and bizarrely involved in Balkan politics. His effort to reconcile Kosovo and Serbia, from which the former seceded in 2008, risks an embarrassing crash after the indictment of Kosovar President Hashim Thaci of war crimes. But Grenell has achieved more success than all the European Union's diplomats over the last decade.

One of the most perspicacious insights of famed German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was that the Balkans was not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. Had his successors in Germany, as well as statesmen across Europe, heeded his admonition World War I would have been avoided. And with it an even worse conflict a generation later, as well as the ensuing Cold War. As Bismarck feared, "it will be some damn foolish thing in the Balkans that sets off" a disastrous human conflagration.

Alas, the US repeated that mistake three decades ago as Yugoslavia disintegrated. What seemed to most attract the Clinton administration was the fact that America had no conceivable security interests at stake in the region. It was the ultimate example of what Michael Mandelbaum of Johns Hopkins University termed "foreign policy as social work."

Like so many international controversies, the extended Yugoslav civil war always was more complicated than the simple morality play portrayed by Washington's establishment hawks. The death of Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito in 1980 and collapse a decade later of the Soviet Union, which long threatened Yugoslavia's independence, set the stage for the latter state's dissolution.

The US and European governments violently resisted their own secessionist movements but adopted a different position toward Yugoslavia. Germany took the lead in encouraging the Serb-dominated polyglot nation's breakup. But the allies decided that ethnic minorities newly subjected to the vagaries of ethnic rule, meaning Serbs, should not secede.

Unfortunately, Croatia and Bosnia included substantial numbers of Serbs, who had no reason to trust newly ascendant local ethnic groups. For instance, Croatia's Franjo Tudjman was an anti-Semite and violent anti-Serb – though he had no love for Muslims either. Although the Yugoslav military and Serbian forces committed the worst war crimes, Croat, Bosnian Croat, and Bosniak militias also were responsible for manifold atrocities.

The only consistency in US policy was that the Serbs always lost. Everyone else could secede from territory that they controlled. Serbs could never secede from territory anyone else controlled. Everyone else could enforce multi-ethnic federations. Serbs could never enforce such systems. When the Serbs drove out other groups it was ethnic cleansing. When other groups drove out Serbs the crimes were not even mentioned, let alone termed "ethnic cleansing."

Indeed, Washington armed and trained Croatian forces which launched Operation Storm in 1995, which ousted a couple hundred thousand Serbs. In the early 2000s I visited Croatia's Krajina region, the site of the Balkans' worst ethnic cleansing until the exodus of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo – empty farms and ruined churches dotted the countryside, while buildings along city streets evidenced battle damage. The US actively obstructed peace attempts in Bosnia, convincing the Muslim leadership to abandon the 1992 Lisbon Agreement for peaceful power-sharing and declare independence, which resulted in years of bitter and bloody combat.

This disastrous, bloody mess was ended by the 1995 Dayton Agreement, an exercise in coercive international social engineering by Richard Holbrooke that served Washington's interests rather than addressed the needs of the various Yugoslavs. The pact affirmed secession by Croats and Bosnian Muslims and cemented their subsequent dominance over ethnic Serb minorities. To the good, it ended the fighting, but it was a political document, with few consistent principles, and devoid of concern for fairness or morality. Bosnia remains a hapless, unloved, and misgoverned state today, as Western officials lament the refusal of ethnic Serbs to worship the late Holbrooke's handiwork. There is no logic in allowing some groups to escape hated misrule by others while condemning others to suffer the same fate. But Washington treated Serbs as if they were afflicted with a double dose of original sin while Croat and Bosniak leaders were virginal creatures without fault.

The US engaged in a repeat Balkans intervention a few years later. Kosovo was an autonomous area within Serbia, not a separate province, like Bosnia and Croatia. It was regarded as the cradle of Serbian civilization and was the site of the famed Battle of Kosovo on the Field of the Blackbirds in 1389. This defeat by the Ottoman Empire has served as a symbol of loss for the Serbian people ever since. However, Tito actively encouraged migration into Kosovo which radically shifted its ethnic character; devolution of power from Belgrade to Pristina led to discrimination and sometimes violence against the disempowered Serb minority. The 1980s showcased ethnic and political conflict, punctuated by unrest, protests, crackdowns, and purges.

Then in 1987 Slobodan Milosevic used Kosovo to fan Serbian nationalism while launching his bid for power. At his behest Belgrade revoked Kosovo's autonomy and reasserted central government control over the area in 1989. With 90 percent of the population ethnic Albanian, parallel government and social institutions developed, as well as violent resistance. The Kosovo Liberation Army, of which Hashim Thaci was a top commander, emerged publicly in 1995 and within three years had launched a brutal insurgency, murdering Serb officials and ethnic-Albanian collaborators alike. Before the Clinton administration decided to adopt the KLA as an ally, Robert Gelbard, the special US envoy to the Balkans, termed the organization "without any questions, a terrorist group."

However, quickly remembering administration policy that the Serbs always lose, Washington changed its position. At the Rambouillet conference the US, led by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, treated the KLA as an ally. Indeed, she was frustrated at the organization's initial reluctance to sign an agreement that did not guarantee independence, since she was counting on

Serbian rejection to justify American military intervention. Belgrade understandably opposed Washington's demand that NATO administer Kosovo and treat Serbia as a defeated enemy, with free transit for allied military units and legal immunity for NATO forces throughout all of Yugoslavia. No serious nation could accept such an abrogation of sovereignty. After Serbia refused the US diktat in March, 1999, the supposedly defensive transatlantic alliance launched an aggressive war against a state which had neither attacked nor threatened any member.

There was no public enthusiasm for war and the Republican-dominated Congress refused to authorize the conflict. After the US started bombing, the Milosevic government responded brutally with the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians. The *New York Times* reported that Serbs taunted the refugees: "This is not your land – you will never see it again" and "Go to your NATO – go to your Clinton." A great moral wrong, it nevertheless was *a response to, not cause of*, America's intervention. But it nevertheless seemed to retroactively justify the administration's policy.

After 78 days of bombing – the Clinton administration was unwilling to risk a ground war – and hundreds or thousands of Serbian civilian casualties later, Belgrade yielded. NATO, with a late appearance from Russia, occupied Kosovo, after which the KLA spearheaded the ethnic cleansing of about a quarter million ethnic Serbs, gypsies, and non-Albanian Muslims, with little allied response. Milosevic lost the 2000 presidential election to Vojislav Kostunica, a moderate nationalist who represented a broad opposition coalition. The following year the government extradited Milosevic to the Hague, despite internal opposition, to face trial by the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, Belgrade continued to oppose Kosovo's independence.

The Pristina government, dominated by former KLA members, gained a reputation as a violent, criminal black hole in Europe. In 2004 a second round of anti-Serb ethnic cleansing occurred, with some deaths, more people displaced, and many churches and homes destroyed. At that time representatives of Kosovo and Serbia were engaged in UN-backed talks which in truth were merely diplomatic Kabuki Theater, negotiations organized by the West to offer cover for the predetermined end of independence. In 2008 Kosovo dropped all pretense and declared nationhood.

Unintentionally hilarious was President George W. Bush's assertion shortly before Pristina's announcement that "the Serbian people can know they have a friend in America." You would not expect a true friend to dismantle your country. As Kostunica observed the previous year: "America must find another way to show its affection and love for the Albanians, without offering them Serb territories." Shortly after Bush's comment, a Serbian mob returned his sentiments by setting the US embassy in Belgrade on fire.

Even after Kosovars declared independence, neither the US nor European states, most of which recognized the new country, were willing to countenance the secession of Serb-majority areas, most notably the city of Mitrovica and territory north of the Ibar River. Although a majority of residents desired to remain in Serbia, the US and Europe opposed self-determination, despite their earlier rhetoric. The concern expressed over "changing borders" was nonsense, belied by the very creation an independent Kosovo, which resulted in massive territorial shifts. All that appeared to matter was that the Serbs were supposed to lose.

Thaci was independent Kosovo's first elected prime minister. In 2016 he became president. Kosovo's emergence was rocky. A Russian veto blocked its entry into the United Nations. Fifteen of the 112 nations recognizing Pristina later withdrew their assent. EU members Cyprus, Greece, Romania, and Spain, fearful of separatist activity in their nations, and Slovakia refused to recognize Kosovo, and blocked the new country's entry into the continental organization.

Moreover, the Pristina government was regularly criticized by the EU. For instance, in 2017 the European Parliament passed a resolution which stressed "that systemic corruption is contrary to the fundamental EU values of transparency and independence of the judiciary; reiterates its concern about the very slow progress in the fight against corruption and organized crime and calls for renewed efforts and a clear political will to tackle these issues, which hamper future significant economic progress; regrets that corruption and organized crime go unpunished in certain areas of Kosovo, notably in the north; is concerned that the track record of investigations, prosecutions and final convictions remains poor and that confiscation and sequestration of criminal assets is rarely utilized despite their being an essential tool in fighting corruption."

Moreover, the European Parliament expressed "concern that Kosovo continues to be a storage and transit country for hard drugs; notes with concern the lack of secure storage for seized drugs prior to destruction; expresses serious concerns about the low rate of convictions in cases against human trafficking, despite Kosovo being a source, transit and destination for trafficked women and children; notes with concern the existence of armed groups and their involvement in organized criminal activities such as arms smuggling and the apparent impunity with which they are able to operate across borders."

Similar worries remained last year, when the European Commission observed: "Kosovo is at an early stage/has some level of preparation in the **fight against corruption**. Kosovo has made some progress through significant legislative reforms in the rule of law area and in investigating and prosecuting of high-level cases. Progress was also made on preliminary confiscation of assets although final confiscations remain low. Corruption is widespread and remains an issue of concern." Moreover, said the organization: "Kosovo is at an early stage in the **fight against organized crime**. Some progress was made notably through significant legislative reforms in the rule of law area, in investigating and prosecuting high-level cases and on the preliminary freezing of assets. However, little progress was made on final confiscation of assets and there are still few financial investigations and final convictions. Measures are needed to strictly ensure there is no political interference with operational activities of law enforcement bodies and the prosecution. The situation in the north of Kosovo with regards to organized crime continues to pose challenges for law enforcement agencies."

Perhaps the biggest political problem remained relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Serbs who remained within Kosovo generally refused to cooperate with Pristina and frustrated its attempt to control the territory's nominal border with Serbia. In 2013 Belgrade eliminated minority assemblies for Kosovo's Serbs, but the latter continued to resist integration into Kosovo. The EU promoted "normalization" talks, which were intended to force Serbia to accept Pristina's independence. Relations between the two states oscillated, but generally headed down under Aleksandar Vucic, prime minister and now president of Serbia, and the big winner in elections held last weekend. In 2018 Kosovo launched a trade war against Belgrade, which ended only in April.

Despite EU criticism, Richard Grenell, who last fall was appointed special representative for Kosovo and Serbia peace negotiations, launched his own peace initiative. He pushed Pristina to drop its penalty tariffs, causing left-wing Prime Minister Albin Kurti, a surprise victor in last October's election, to complain: "In the past, American envoys, be they from State Department or from the White House, they were meeting us halfway, they were mediators." But, he added: "It is the first time now that we have an American envoy, he has the same identical stance with Serbia."

Grenell orchestrated the suspension of \$50 million in development assistance when Kurti refused to back down. Grenell also retweeted Sen. David Perdue's statement that "If Kosovo is not fully committed to peace, then the US should reconsider its presence there," which amounts to 600 peacekeeping troops. Most important, this most undiplomatic of diplomats promoted what Kurti called "a parliamentary coup d'état" to oust the latter just weeks after he took office.

Explained Grenell: "What I am trying to do is just look at all of the issues that have been stuck on the table that have economic impact and we are just going to a wrestle them through." Vucic is a nationalist and populist who long ago served as Milosevic's minister of information, or propaganda chief. Nevertheless, Vucic is widely seen as an opportunist ready to abandon his nation's claim to Kosovo – after all, no one believes Belgrade will ever again rule there – for sufficient benefits. Milan Igrutinovic at the Institute of European Studies argued that a deal is possible if it "is more than the recognition of Kosovo's independence, something that can be presented as an equitable, reasonable, productive deal, a non-defeat, to the Serbs."

Grenell has publicly emphasized economics: "We're going to push both the government and the leaders in Kosovo and Serbia to say, 'look at the people, start moving forward with jobs'." He said politics was up to the EU, but so far that organization has failed to offer solutions with any chance of success.

No doubt, both Serbia and Kosovo need growth. But ignoring nationalistic considerations risks failure, as with the disastrous "deal of the century" that would permanently subjugate Palestinians to Israel. Vucic said that recognition of Kosovo, the essential for any agreement by Pristina, "will not be the topic, nor will we allow it to become the topic" at the negotiating session scheduled for the White House on Saturday. And no comparable concessions by Kosovo appear to be on the agenda, either.

However, there may be progress behind closed doors. In the background floats the possibility of population and territorial swaps, centered on Mitrovica. Over the last three years Thaci and Vucic have talked about engaging in "border correction," resulting in much pearl-clutching in European capitals about the supposed risks of changing borders. Yet these same governments recklessly yet enthusiastically blew up both Yugoslavia and Serbia when they thought doing so was in their interests.

Kurti claimed that Grenell also advocated trading land. Grenell denied discussing the issue and said it would not come up on Saturday. Slovak Miroslav Lajcak, the EU special representative to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, also did not respond when questioned about the issue. Which reinforces rumors that European diplomats if not the EU as an organization have shifted to a more favorable view of this approach. Hopefully reality has made an unusual appearance in both Washington and Brussels.

The White House session, planned for Thaci and Vucic, was expected to supercharge negotiations. But on Wednesday Thaci was indicted by a special prosecutor for war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed by the KLA. The reported victims "involved hundreds of known victims of Kosovo Albanian, Serb, Roma, and other ethnicities and include political opponents." Others also were charged, including Kadri Veseli, former speaker of parliament. The prospect of trials of Kosovo leaders has roiled politics before. Last year prime minister Ramush Haradinaj, another KLA leader, quit after being questioned by the same body; he was tried and acquitted of war crimes seven years before. The Hague court released its charges against Thaci earlier than planned because he and others had acted "to obstruct and undermine the work" of the prosecutors.

Thaci had begun traveling in Europe on his way to Washington, D.C., and canceled his visit, saying that he planned to return to Pristina. Grenell responded cautiously: "I respect his decision not to attend the discussions until the legal issues of those allegations are settled." Attending in Thaci's stead will be Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti, in office just three weeks. Hoti, a former economics professor and finance minister, lacks Thaci's military background and political credibility. Which means the Washington meeting is likely to achieve little more than a few impressive photo opportunities.

Thaci said that he will "respond positively" if requested to appear, which is a near certainty. He could still help push through any settlement, but his extradition to the Hague would create turmoil in Pristina. Yet failure to comply would disrupt relations with the EU, undermining any agreement reached. At the same time the Trump administration, at least, would be inclined to dismiss the Hague tribunal – the president cares for naught about human rights and the secretary of state announced sanctions on anyone at the International Criminal Court who dared investigate Americans. So what happens next is impossible to predict.

Thus continues the fallout from Washington's extended "splendid little war" in the Balkans that began more than a quarter century ago. The US should not have initiated the conflict or imposed the settlement. The consequence was the spread, not the end, of injustice. Once in, Washington found it almost impossible to get out.

In his maladroit way, however, Richard Grenell's effort offers a small chance for an exit. The US should not be manipulating governments in Pristina, especially after all the endless complaints in Washington over foreign intervention in America's elections. His emphasis on economics ignores the intangible values which most deeply motivate most people. But his apparent willingness to consider the heretofore unthinkable – allowing ethnic Albanians and Serbs rather than American and European officials to decide who lives where – offers a solution that is more just and practical than the usual diplomatic proposal. This initiative also could provide a model for resolving other ethnic conflicts, such as in Bosnia.

Still, the whole enterprise could fall apart. Which is an inevitable risk of treating war criminals and ethnic terrorists as allies, as Washington did with the KLA. At least the chaos and combat unleashed by Bill Clinton's Balkans crusade remain minimal compared to the death and destruction resulting from George W. Bush's misbegotten invasion of Iraq. But that is damning with faint praise.

Hopefully the next time a president considers the interventionist temptation, he or she will consider Washington's decades of counterproductive social engineering in the Balkans and

ponder Bismarck's prescient advice, which applies far more generally. And leave such problems to those who live closer, know more, are involved, and must live with the consequences.

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