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The Allied Project In Bosnia Might Implode

So what? The U.S. and Europe should allow Bosnia to sort out its own problems, even if that results in a break-up.

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A mid the wreckage of two decades of failed military interventions, highlighted by the collapse of America's Afghan ally even before the last U.S. troops flew home, Washington's unofficial war party always cited the Balkans as a success. Now that mission, too, is going south, with the unloved polyglot state of Bosnia and Herzegovina heading toward possible breakup. The European Union's polite *Gauleiter*, "High Representative" Christian Schmidt, warned that his colonial charge faced "the greatest existential threat of the postwar period." The question is, so what?

The Balkans acquired a reputation for being the fount of conflict in the 19th century. Bosnia and Herzegovina was notorious for hosting the June 28, 1914 murder of Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian terrorist, which served as the trigger for World War I.

The conclusion of that terrible conflagration yielded several weak smaller states, which Germans angry over their nation's territorial losses dismissed as *saisonstaaten*, or states for a season. These countries proved vulnerable as World War II approached, but Yugoslavia survived German occupation during that conflict and Soviet pressure during the succeeding Cold War.

However, roughly three decades ago the multi-ethnic state finally imploded. Yugoslav dictator Josip Broz Tito, who emerged from the carnage of World War II to rule, died, loosening the center's hold over a half dozen constituent republics. The Soviet Union dissolved, eliminating the threat of outside intervention. Finally, Slobodan Milosevic, a middling power in communist politics, played the ethnic card to grab the presidency first of the Serbian republic and then of Yugoslavia.

Amid a series of civil wars, spurred by support from Germany, which short-circuited any negotiated departure, the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia

emerged as independent countries. (The territory of Kosovo later broke free of Serbia but remains unrecognized by many nations and the United Nations.) Only Slovenia's departure was relatively straightforward. However, Croatia, Macedonia, and Montenegro, despite varied difficulties, today are accepted as independent states.

More problematic has been the development of Bosnia, home to Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks (Muslims). Both ethnic Croats and Serbs wanted to secede and join their co-nationals in ethnically unified states, while the Bosniak plurality desired to maintain its dominance and preserve a multi-ethnic state.

The Lisbon Agreement was reached in 1992 to peacefully divide the republic, only to be torpedoed by Warren Zimmerman, then the U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia, who is thought to have promised Bosnia recognition if the Bosniaks rejected the settlement. War resulted and thousands needlessly died. Although ethnic Serbs were most notorious for committing atrocities, neither the Croatian nor Bosniak forces were reluctant to murder opponents. Too late, even U.S. officials admitted that they made a mistake killing the agreement.

Nothing impelled American involvement in the Balkans other than the Clinton administration's grandiose ambitions. Unwilling to leave Europe to manage its own backyard, Washington adopted a "Serbs always lose" policy, insisting that every ethnic group was entitled to secede from any territory with a Serbian majority (Slovenes, Croats, Bosniaks, Kosovars) but that Serbs could never secede from any territory with a different ethnic majority (Bosnia, Kosovo, Croatia). Indeed, in the latter, the Clinton administration even refused to acknowledge ostentatious ethnic cleansing, which largely emptied the Krajina region of ethnic Serbs.

Washington actively aided and abetted anti-Serb forces in every case, launching a bombing campaign in 1995 against Bosnian Serbs to impose the Dayton Agreement, which sought to preserve a multi-ethnic state dominated by Muslim Bosniaks. The assumption was that ethnic Serbs would grow to love their oppressors if only sufficient force was applied for sufficient time. Since then, the three-part conglomeration—including ethnic Croats who also had indicated a desire to depart, in this case to join the new country of Croatia—has been effectively ruled by a European overlord titled the high representative. To this imperial throwback the Bosnian people have been expected to submit in all things. (On his arrival the latest foreign import, German Christian Schmidt, said he was honored "to serve the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina," mistaking what military governors do to their occupied populations as "service.")

However, the ethnic-Serb minority has little warmed to the viceroy from Brussels. After years of campaigning against his people's de facto imprisonment in the U.S.-E.U. imposed state, Serbian leader Milorad Dodik is threatening to pull out. He has long been a critic of colonial rule, not unreasonably calling Bosnia a Western "experiment" that "does not work" and a "failed country." At the very least the entity is unwanted, coerced, and unneeded.

Last month Dodik said the Serb republic planned to withdraw from the joint military, judiciary, and tax authority. He pointed out that his territory's participation in these institutions resulted from decisions of international diplomats, not provisions of the constitution. He also moved to create an independent version of Bosnia's agency for drug approval. Schmidt called this "tantamount to secession without proclaiming it." Dodik's critics claim that a regional legislature cannot override the "national" parliament, but who will stop him if he proceeds? Allowed Dodik: "There is no authority in the world that can stop us."

Journalist Srecko Latal resorted to scaremongering, calling this "a terrifying development." Indeed, Latal foresaw an apocalypse: "The fuse on the Balkans' powder keg has been lit. It must be stamped out before the region, and even Europe itself, is engulfed in fire." Equally hysterical was Hikmet Karcic of the Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, who warned that, without U.S. intervention, "Bosnia and Herzegovina could spiral and become another Afghanistan." Another *Afghanistan*? Heck, if President Joe Biden doesn't send in the 101st Airborne tomorrow Dodik might become the next Hitler, Stalin, or Mao, or perhaps all three rolled into one! These paranoid fantasies reflect a desire for control, not assessment of reality.

Dodik made clear he doesn't want conflict and intends to attack no one. Whatever his private fantasies, doing so would be suicidal. In practice, the ethnic Serbs simply want to be left alone, without colonial oversight from Washington and Brussels. Why should Croats, who long wanted to join the Croatian state, and Bosniaks, go to war to compel the Serbs to stay? If the Bosniaks had a right to leave Yugoslavia, why not wave a pleasant goodbye to the Serbs if they leave Bosnia?

Unfortunately, the Bosniaks want to keep their recalcitrant citizens, just like the Kosovars oppose releasing ethnic Serbs from Kosovo. To prevent the captives from going free, Bosnian Muslims harken back to the civil war, which, they contend, could have been stopped by timely outside intervention. So naturally, they believe, Washington should intervene now and...do something. Without specifying what.

Alas, the Biden administration, despite having much important work on its agenda, has been threatening to do something as well. Also without specifying what. State Department Counselor Derek Chollet made a hilarious call for Bosnia's leaders "to rise above their own self-interest and to try to keep in mind the broader interest of their country."

However, Bosnia is not and never was the ethnic Serbs' country. So why should they be concerned about its interest? Chollet implicitly recognized this inconvenient fact when he made the inevitable threat, presumably of sanctions but conceivably military action, too: "If leaders continue on the path toward divisiveness, disintegration, withdrawal from the central institutions, there are tools we have to punish that kind of behavior." Thou shalt love your overlords, or else.

What kind of a democracy forces other people to live in arrangements they did not voluntarily agree to? America does! The all-seeing, all-knowing social engineers in Washington will prescribe the way of life for ethnic Serbs in Bosnia. Explained Chollet: “The United States is committed to do whatever we can to try to prevent the worst from happening and, more than that, try to achieve an even better outcome” by ensuring Bosnia’s subservience to the West, or putting it “back on its path towards its Euro-Atlantic destination,” as Chollet more politely allowed.

For the time being, at least, Dodik seems determined to resist the new colonialism. He dismissed the threat of sanctions: “We serve our people and not the U.S. interests.” That sentiment alone is likely to arouse Washington’s shock and outrage. After all, for at least three decades, the Blob believed that it was entitled to chart Bosnia’s future.

The answer to the latest Balkans contretemps is simple: Washington should shut up and the E.U. should bring home its “high representative.” Encouraging peace is a worthwhile goal. Micromanaging other peoples’ lives is not. The U.S. and Europe should allow Bosnia to sort out its own problems, even if that results in a break-up.

As my colleague Ted Galen Carpenter pointed out, “Bosnia is a political and economic zombie, and no amount of Western effort can truly give it life.” It is time to stop trying. After decades of outside rule, allow the Bosnians and other residents of the Balkans to decide how and with whom they want to live.

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