

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

Memo to the West: Let Balkan countries draw their own lines

It's been 25 years and the U.S. and European stamp on the region's current configuration has hardly worked out for the better.

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What to do about the Balkans has international policymakers debating proposals for a territorial settlement between Serbia and Kosovo.

The Trump administration pushed a deal but ran out of time before last November's election. Europeans are now discussing possible border adjustments to resolve a dispute reaching back more than two decades.

If Afghanistan was the graveyard of empires, the Balkans was the ignition of conflicts. In the late 19th century the steadily weakening Ottoman Empire yielded an unstable mix of smaller states. The Habsburg empire's disintegration in World War I yielded additional weak nations, which Germans dismissed as *saison staaten*, or states for a season. The destruction of one of them, Czechoslovakia, played an important role in the onset of World War II.

Yugoslavia emerged from World War I, survived World War II, and managed an independent course throughout the Cold War. However, Belgrade's collapse came after the disappearance of two unifying forces, Josip Broz Tito's rule and Soviet threats to intervene.

Alas, the West, led by Serbophobic Germany, encouraged what became a succession of speedy secessions, leading to a series of escalating battles. Yugoslavia, a Serb-dominated ethnic polyglot, was doomed, but negotiated exits with legal and political guarantees for ethnic minorities trapped in the new states could have minimized conflict. Ethnic Serbs were responsible for many atrocities, but war crimes were common to all, including against the ethnic Serbs in Croatia's Krajina region during the decisive "Operation Storm" in 1995.

The final act of Yugoslavia's agony was provided by Kosovo, dominated by ethnic Albanians. Washington originally labeled members of the Kosovo Liberation Army as terrorists but the Yugoslav military's brutal crackdown brought in NATO, which saw this "out-of-area" operation as justification for the alliance's survival after the end of the Cold War. The great powers ignored — again — the considered judgment of Imperial Germany's "Iron Chancellor" Otto von Bismarck, who opined that the Balkans were not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier.

The Kosovo war's aftermath occasioned a comic-opera Russian military race to Kosovo's capital of Pristina to force recognition of Moscow's interests. The reckless NATO Supreme Commander, Wesley Clarke, ordered his British deputy to block and if necessary fire on the Russian soldiers; Lt. Gen. Michael Jackson thankfully refused, explaining that "I'm not going to start the Third World War for you." Such were the risks of treating Moscow as of no account.

The allies created a faux negotiating process, predetermined to result in Kosovo's independence, despite serious problems with the new nation's development. The allied occupation failed to prevent two rounds of ethnic cleansing of Serbs, Roma, and other minorities — the first in 1999 after the war and the second in 2004. Under NATO tutelage Kosovo also was noted for official corruption and organized crime while elections elevated independence fighters oft-accused of committing war crimes.

Belgrade refused to consent to its division, leading to the territory's declaration of independence in 2008. Roughly half of the U.N.'s 193 members recognize Kosovo, but five EU members have refused and Russia's opposition blocks U.N. membership.

Serbia's and Kosovo's relations have ranged between bad and worse. Serbs within Kosovo refused to cooperate with the Pristina government while the latter launched a trade war against Belgrade. Brussels attempted to use prospective EU membership as an inducement for Serbia to accept Kosovo as is, but the subject remains toxic politics in Belgrade.

Last fall Richard Grenell, Donald Trump's ambassador to Germany and special Balkans envoy, attempted to reconcile the two antagonists. He explained: "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." Most Serbs realized that Belgrade would never again rule Kosovo and were open to a deal. Milan Igrutinovic at the Institute of European Studies suggested something "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."

Thus, between Serbia and Kosovo there was whispered talk of "border correction," meaning territorial and population transfers, a common practice in earlier times. However, that effort foundered after the International Criminal Court indictment of then-Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and his resignation.

The issue moved back to the EU, and the Biden administration has shown no interest. Roiling the usual bureaucratic inertia of the Europeans, however, is a recent paper thought to originate with Slovenia's government, which denied authorship. The document urged breaking up Bosnia, an unloved tri-ethnic state held together only at allied insistence, and partitioning Kosovo, allowing most of it to join Albania while giving the area with an ethnic Serb majority special autonomous status.

The proposal horrified official Europe, even though its earlier handiwork had proved so unsatisfactory to the people forced to live with the results. European Commission spokesman Eric Mamer insisted: "We are absolutely not in favor of any changes in borders." The State Department criticized even thinking about the idea: "recent unwarranted speculation about changing borders in the Balkans along ethnic lines risks fostering instability in the region and evokes memories of past tensions."

Yet border swaps could prove to be a moral and practical solution, at least to the continuing tension between Serbia and Kosovo. Although some Serbs are scattered about Kosovo, there is a significant concentration in the city of Mitrovica and surrounding territory north of the Ibar River. Most of them want to remain in Serbia. If the ethnic Albanians had the right to leave Serbia, why shouldn't ethnic Serbs be allowed to leave Kosovo?

In practice, allied policy in the Balkans was "the Serbs always lose," but that is not a defensible principle for peace-making today. Every ethnic minority except the Serbs was allowed and sometimes encouraged to secede (Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Kosovars); Serbs never were allowed the same opportunity (from Croatia, Bosnia, or Kosovo). This policy was simultaneously consistent and unprincipled.

Observers also warn that adjusting borders would open Pandora's Box of other ethnic claims. However, the end of the Cold War was all about changing borders. The Soviet Union dissolved. Yugoslavia collapsed. South Ossetia and Abkhazia seceded from Georgia with Russian assistance. The Donbass attempted the same from Ukraine while Moscow formally annexed Crimea. Most importantly, the allies cut up Serbia. It is a little late for everyone to claim border virginity.

Most important, America and Europe have bungled attempts to play global social engineers. They believe that states should be ever bigger and more diverse. People in the Balkans evidently do not. Even if multi-ethnic federalism is seen as the liberal ideal, it obviously isn't the practical and peaceful solution in this case. It is time to allow locals to attempt to settle their disputes.

The U.S. and EU have obvious interests in preserving the peace. They do not have a similar interest in attempting to force others to live by arbitrary rules concocted in Washington and Brussels. After spending decades bungling attempts to remake the Mideast, Central Asia, and the Balkans, Washington should have learned this lesson by now.

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