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Trump's Meddling In The Balkans Has Led To A Super Kosovo Fail

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Given the saturation coverage of the coronavirus outbreak in the media, it may seem surprising that developments on other significant issues in the world continue to take place. But they do, and the Balkans are one region experiencing an upsurge in tensions.

On March 25, Kosovo's recently installed left-wing reformist government led by Albin Kurti fell after losing a no-confidence vote in parliament. Kurti is now merely the acting prime minister heading a caretaker cabinet until a new government can be formed.

Astute observers of Balkan affairs blamed the collapse on the Trump administration's ongoing meddling, including making a series of politically difficult demands on the fragile government in Pristina. One analyst, Emily Costello, concluded that Kurti's ouster "was driven by domestic forces desperate to block change, and the US administration's determination to remove a government unwilling to comply with its demands." There is considerable truth to that allegation, and the latest incident is consistent with a long pattern of intrusive U.S. policies in the Balkans that have made often challenging situations there even worse.

Bill Clinton's administration orchestrated a successful NATO air war in 1999 against Serbia to dislodge that country's restless, predominately Albanian Kosovo province from Belgrade's control. In 2008, Washington led a multilateral effort to recognize Kosovo's independence. That maneuver was especially unhelpful. Instead of having the United Nations, (which assumed control of the Kosovo occupation following NATO's military victory) make that decision, Washington bypassed the UN Security Council (and a nearly certain Russian veto) to achieve its policy objectives. The United States did not even work through NATO or the European Union (EU), since several members of both organizations had secessionist problems of their own and, therefore, opposed ratifying Kosovo's secession and independence. Instead, Washington worked with selected NATO allies in an ad hoc coalition to achieve that outcome—setting a variety of dangerous precedents in the process.

U.S. pressure led most of its allies in Europe and beyond to establish diplomatic relations with Kosovo. Within a few months, more than 70 nations had done so, but progress slowed dramatically after the initial surge. The Pristina government claims that 116 nations now recognize the country's independence, but that total still leaves a large minority of countries

(more than 80) that refuse to take that step. Serbia (backed by its longtime Russian ally) has waged a diplomatic counteroffensive since 2008 to block Pristina's progress on that front, with at least modest success. Indeed, Belgrade insists that it has induced 17 countries to rescind their recognitions in the past two years.

The diplomatic warfare is a major source of the continuing animosity between Serbia and Kosovo. In November 2018, the Kosovo government imposed a 100 percent tariff on all Serbian imports until Belgrade relents in its campaign to dissuade nations from establishing formal ties with Pristina. The recognition issue is not the only bitter dispute, however. Serbia refuses to accept Kosovo's independence until the authorities there agree to "territorial adjustments" that would allow the predominantly Serbian region in northern Kosovo to rejoin Serbia instead of leaving the inhabitants as a despised and powerless minority in an overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian country. Pristina has steadfastly refused to make that concession.

Into that political and diplomatic morass, the Trump administration has now wandered. Washington apparently took that step in response to urgent requests from Kosovo's hardline president, Hashim Thaci, a former leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army during the insurgency against Serbia and a man EU investigators accused of multiple war crimes. Thaci's apparent motive for approaching Trump, was irritation about the lack of progress toward his country's eventual admission to the EU. He also seemed miffed about the mounting EU pressure on Kosovo to compromise with Serbia. Perhaps he assumed that Washington would continue its pattern of biased, knee-jerk support for Kosovo dating back to the Clinton administration.

If he assumed that outcome, Thaci appears to have miscalculated. In a December 14, 2019 letter to Thaci, Trump made it clear that he intended to put pressure on Kosovo, not just on Serbia. "I urge you and the leaders of Kosovo to seize this unique moment, speak with a unified voice during the peace talks, and refrain from actions that would make an agreement more difficult to achieve," Trump wrote in his letter to Thaci.

In early February 2020, Trump's special envoy to the Balkans, U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell, promptly issued thinly disguised demands that to ensure continued U.S. support, Prime Minister Kurti's new administration must immediately remove the 100 percent tariffs. Donald Trump Jr, then weighed-in regarding the Balkans controversy, explicitly endorsing the comments of Sen. David Perdue (R.-GA) that the United States should threaten to withdraw the 650 troops it still stationed in Kosovo as part of an international peacekeeping force unless Pristina complied with Washington's demands regarding the tariff issue.

Some analysts speculate that Trump seeks a foreign policy coup by brokering a settlement between Serbia and Kosovo. With the prospect of a major peace accord involving North Korea fading by the week, so the theory goes, the president desperately needs a blockbuster achievement on the international front, and a breakthrough in the Balkans appears to present the best opportunity.

If that is Trump's goal, the policy is sputtering. So far, it has done little except create additional agitation in the region, lead to a hardening of Pristina's stance, and topple a reformist prime minister. It also has great potential to annoy European governments, fomenting suspicions that the United States wants to displace the major EU powers (especially Germany) from having the lead role in dealing with Balkan issues—thereby demonstrating the alleged indispensability of Washington's continuing "leadership" in Europe.

That suspicion likely has considerable validity. Trump's behavior is reminiscent of the observation about President Theodore Roosevelt's extreme egotism by his own daughter. Her father was so determined to be the center of attention, she quipped, that he "always wanted to be the corpse at every funeral, the bride at every wedding, and the baby at every christening."

But Trump is not the only U.S. leader guilty of such hubris. It has characterized U.S. policy in the Balkans for a quarter century, and Washington's behavior has helped make a mess of the region. The EU has far more legitimate interests at stake there than does the United States, and it has more leverage than Washington possesses, unless U.S. officials foolishly want to provide vast quantities of aid money. European leaders can offer both Kosovo and Serbia membership in the EU, and that is no small carrot.

Indeed, the EU appears to have been the key player in Kosovo's early April decision to lift the onerous tariffs on Serbian goods and offer to resume talks with Belgrade. However, acute difficulties remain even for European mediation efforts. In his April 8 letter to the EU's special envoy, Kurti emphasized that "under no circumstances or situation will issues of mutual sovereignty, territorial integrity and internal affairs be discussed" during new talks with Serbia.

The Trump administration should back away and let the European Union continue its efforts to resolve the Kosovo-Serbia conundrum. U.S. leaders especially must rebuff Kurti's call for the United States (as well as the EU) to "guarantee" any settlement between Kosovo and Serbia. Washington also should withdraw its peacekeeping troops, not as a threat to induce the Pristina government to be more flexible in its dealings with Serbia, but simply because their departure is long overdue. The United States needs to stop trying to micromanage Balkan affairs before it makes matters even worse than it has to this point.

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