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## Germany Makes Another Balkan Mess

| [More](#) [1]

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[Ted Galen Carpenter](#) [2]

German chancellor Angela Merkel has received undeserved praise for adopting an uncompromising position regarding Kosovo in meetings with Serbian president Boris Tadic. The latest example of a laudatory reaction is the [piece](#) [3] by Morton Abramowitz and James Hooper.

Abramowitz and Hooper are thrilled that she made it clear to Tadic that “Kosovo would not be partitioned” and that “the area inhabited by Serbs north of the Ibar River was Kosovo territory.” Further, she told the leader of a still-fragile democratic Serbia that the Kosovo issue “had to be resolved before Serbia could enter the EU.”

Rather than meriting praise, Merkel’s rigid, obtuse and decidedly unhelpful stance may have torpedoed any chance of resolving the Kosovo dispute in either a timely or sustainable fashion. Her ultimatum also undercuts the most democratic and pro-Western Serbian government that the EU is likely to encounter in the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that a German government has made an already-difficult situation in the Balkans even worse. As Yugoslavia came apart in the early 1990s, Berlin sabotaged a promising international initiative that might have calmed the brewing storm in the newly minted country of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This time, German officials have spurned Belgrade’s hints that, despite major domestic political impediments, the Serbian government might be prepared to accept Kosovo’s independence—if territorial adjustments were made so that the predominantly Serb region north of the Ibar River would remain with Serbia. Shrewd diplomats would have explored those hints to see if they were serious. Merkel and her advisers, unfortunately, rejected any suggestion of reciprocity.

Yet, if a partition of Kosovo would remove a major headache from the Balkan region, it would seem to be a price well worth paying. To reject such an idea out of hand is a case of diplomatic malpractice. Insisting that Kosovo be recognized within its current, arbitrary boundaries creates needless instability. At best, the Serb population north of the Ibar will be a restless minority discriminated against by the Albanian Kosovar regime. At worst, they become a candidate for ethnic cleansing on the watch of NATO and the EU.

Not only did Merkel probably wreck any chance for an orderly end to the Kosovo squabble, virtually guaranteeing that peacekeeping forces will have to remain for a very long time, she also set a worrisome precedent regarding the standards for joining the EU. By demanding that Serbia abjectly accept the secession of a portion of its territory, she is including a requirement that no current member had to meet. The contrast with the treatment of Cyprus is especially striking. There was no demand that the legitimate Cypriot government accept the independence of the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus before Cyprus could become a member of the EU.

Merkel's position—one that is supported by most (although it should be noted, not all) EU governments—will strengthen the impression among Serbs that the West has one standard for them and a different standard for everyone else in Europe. Unfortunately, that impression often seems well founded. Since the early 1990s, U.S. and EU policies appear to be based on the belief that all ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia have a right to political self-determination, including secession—except for Serbs. It is an ugly, discriminatory approach, and Merkel's conduct is but the latest example.

Far greater Western realism and flexibility is imperative. [The option of partition to create more cohesive and stable political entities](#) [4] needs to be put on the table. That means being receptive to territorial changes based on ethnic partition with respect to both Bosnia and Kosovo. The former is no closer to ethnic reconciliation and political viability today than it was when the Dayton Accords were signed nearly 16 years ago. The artificial nature of that pretend country is exceeded only by its chronically dysfunctional nature.

The task of partition in Kosovo would be more limited and less challenging. The Kosovars would retain control of nearly 90 percent of Kosovo's current territory, and the Serb population would be able to leave the jurisdiction of a political entity that they loathe. In addition, such a breakthrough might enable Kosovo to receive diplomatic recognition from the dozens of countries around the world that, despite intense pressure from the United States and the principal EU countries, have thus far refused to do so.

Ideally, Washington should be able to view Merkel's antics and the entire misguided policy in the Balkans as a bemused spectator. But thanks to the insatiable desire to meddle on the part of previous administrations, we are entangled; the United States has peacekeeping troops in Kosovo. Indeed, personnel from the Texas National Guard are currently on their way there to participate in that quixotic nation-building mission.

U.S. leaders ought to have had enough of the international social-engineering crusade in the Balkans by now. Washington's response to Merkel's ham-handed approach should be

to caution Berlin and other EU capitals about the probable deleterious ramifications of their current policy. U.S. officials also should put their European counterparts on notice that if the Balkans again blow up because of German-led diplomatic mismanagement, the EU will have to deal with the consequences entirely alone. As a first step, the United States should immediately withdraw all of its peacekeeping forces from Kosovo. The broader message to the Europeans should be: Don't even think about calling on Washington to help bail you out of your folly—especially after you've spurned the last best chance for a peaceful, equitable resolution of the Kosovo problem.