



US Must Resist Temptation To Meddle in the Balkans Again

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Bill Clinton's administration made a geopolitical mess in the Balkans during the 1990s by instigating and leading military interventions in both Bosnia and Kosovo. Periodically thereafter, the United States has succumbed to the temptation to interfere diplomatically in the affairs of that chronically dysfunctional region. Now, several of Washington's mini-state "allies" and their advocates in the United States are pressing the Biden administration to take a more active role again. It is imperative that administration officials spurn that campaign.

The latest lobbying effort to get Washington more deeply involved in the region's parochial squabbles came in the form of an October 11 open letter by more than 30 leaders of Bosnian (Muslim) Albanian, and Montenegrin communities in America – many with close ties to the respective governments. Their letter was addressed to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, as well as members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee. It was a document dripping with anti-Serb venom from start to finish.

According to the signatories, there is "grave concern and alarm regarding the growing militancy of the government of Serbia towards Kosovo but also, increasingly, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. We believe that this is a matter of utmost concern to the U.S. because it directly imperils the peace and stability of the Western Balkans region and with that, peace in Europe as a whole." They also did not take long to focus on the Russian bogeyman as an even more important reason why the United States should get involved in curbing Serbia's supposed aggression. "We note also that all of Serbia's expansionist activities to date have come with the explicit support and backing of the Russian Federation and, to that end, Moscow has actively deployed intelligence and para-criminal assets throughout the region to further escalate tensions and embolden the regime in Belgrade."

Moreover, the letter emphasized that Washington must take charge of dealing with this "crisis" – that US officials dare not rely on the European Union to do so. "As the prospects for EU enlargement have all but disappeared, a return to US leadership in the Western Balkans is urgently needed." In other words, the EU's leading powers have made it clear that they do not want to become entangled in these petty spats, nor do they want to have these unstable, quarrelsome states as new EU members anytime soon. Those are also cautionary reasons why the United States should become less, not more, involved in Balkan affairs.

Indeed, another ambition expressed in the open letter should be a flashing red light of danger to Biden administration policymakers. The authors push NATO membership for both Kosovo and Bosnia. Washington already has incurred increased risks for little apparent benefit by allowing several Balkan mini-states, including Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, to join that military alliance. Under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the United States has an obligation to come to the assistance of any other member that is the victim of aggression. Given the murky and toxic ethnic politics of the Balkans, however, it might not be an easy task in the midst of an armed conflict to determine which party was the aggressor and which was the victim.

Adding Kosovo and Bosnia to NATO's ranks would make that task far worse, and it would expose the United States in an array of rising tensions. Serbia still refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence despite NATO's 1999 air war that severed the province from Belgrade's control. Dozens of other countries, including such major players as Russia, China, Brazil, and India, decline to do so as well. In September 2021, Serbian and Kosovar security forces faced off in a tense confrontation along the de facto border, and NATO's long-standing contingent of "peacekeeping" troops deployed to the border to calm tensions. That episode was merely the latest in a series of ugly spats. Indeed, another (albeit smaller) confrontation between Kosovar police and the ethnic Serb minority flared over a different issue in mid-October.

The situation in Bosnia may be even more volatile. The U.S.-NATO military intervention in 1995 ended the 3-year civil war, but it did nothing to resolve the intense animosity among the three feuding ethnic factions – Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. Indeed, the Dayton Accords that the United States imposed, forced the factions to remain together in an utterly dysfunctional country under UN supervision. More than a quarter century later, the UN administrator in Bosnia still largely governs by decree – in essence, that individual behaves as a colonial viceroy.

Bosnian Serbs are making a new bid to secede and create a fully independent state from the portion of Bosnia with a majority Serb population. Unfortunately, Washington and its NATO allies have made it clear on multiple occasions that such a step will never be tolerated. Consequently, Bosnia drifts along in its chronic ungovernable condition. Granting NATO membership to a country with those characteristics ought to be considered an absurdity on its face, but the lobbying effort to do so persists.

Prudent US policymakers would summarily dismiss suggestions for a larger US role in Balkan affairs, especially given the havoc that the initial Western military intervention has created. However, even recent administrations have flirted with that temptation. In late 2019 and early 2020, President Donald Trump personally made a concerted (and predictably futile) effort to resolve the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo over the latter's international status. Earlier,

Trump sent additional US troops as part of the perpetual NATO peacekeeping force along the Serbia-Kosovo border to underscore Washington's commitment.

President Biden needs to make a sharp break with the policies of his predecessors regarding the Balkans. He should emphasize that the United States will play no role with respect to the quarrels of the various parties in that region. Washington made matters much worse by failing to adopt that position when the initial disorders arose in the 1990s. Under no circumstances should the president allow this country to get sucked back into the morass by taking a leadership role in response to the latest disputes.

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