

How the Nobel Peace Prize was Won

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In-depth Report: [THE BALKANS](#)

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari has been widely hailed in the West, where there has been an outpouring of praise for the man and his efforts. Generally seen as a tireless promoter of peace and reconciliation, Ahtisaari has another side that has not received sufficient attention.

Although his record is long, Ahtisaari's role in the diplomatic end to NATO's 1999 war against Yugoslavia is regarded as the key to his selection. In praising the man, Nobel committee secretary Geir Lundestad noted, "There is no alternative to an independent Kosovo." This baldly political statement indicates why Ahtisaari's selection is proving so popular among Western leaders, and it is Kosovo that shows just whose interests Ahtisaari has served.

During the 1999 war, NATO's attacks were having little effect on Yugoslav forces. Through the use of extensive camouflage and decoys, Yugoslav troops had managed to emerge largely unscathed by the end NATO's bombing campaign. U.S. General Wesley Clark led the NATO campaign, and he pressed military and diplomatic contacts from other NATO countries for agreement to widen the scope of bombing. Clark was a strong advocate of bombing civilian targets, and at one meeting he rose from his chair and banged the table with his fist, bellowing, "I've got to get the maximum violence out of this campaign - now!" (1) Under Clark's direction, the air campaign rapidly took on the character of sustained terror bombing. I saw the effects myself when I was in Yugoslavia in 1999. Every town I visited had been bombed. Purely residential areas had been flattened. Cluster bombs struck civilian areas. Hospitals, schools, apartment buildings, factories, bridges, office buildings - there was no category of civilian targets that NATO had not seen fit to hit. It was impossible to avoid the conclusion that NATO's strategy was to win its war through terror tactics.

Terror bombing paved the way for final negotiations. It was Yugoslavia's misfortune that Boris Yeltsin was the president of Russia at the time. He selected former prime minister Victor Chernomyrdin to handle negotiations with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. Always anxious to please the U.S., Yeltsin had Chernomyrdin essentially do little more than deliver NATO's messages to Milosevic. This approach was not yielding fruit, so Chernomyrdin suggested to American officials that it would be helpful to have someone from a non-NATO Western nation join him when he next visited Belgrade. It was Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who offered the name of Martti Ahtisaari. Getting the Russians on board with the American insistence on NATO leading the occupation of Kosovo was the main sticking point. In the end, Yeltsin, as was his habit, gave the U.S. everything it wanted. (2)

Ahtisaari recalls that before departing for Belgrade, through "a major effort we achieved a final communiqué, signed by both the Russians and by the Americans." Russian acquiescence, he correctly felt, would push Milosevic "in a corner." It was the task of

Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin to deliver NATO's final terms, and they visited President Milosevic on June 2. (3)

Ljubisa Ristic was president of the Yugoslav United Left (JUL), a party formed from 23 smaller communist and left parties. JUL was closely allied with the ruling Socialist Party and a member of the governing coalition. Ristic was also a personal friend of Milosevic's. He explains what happened at the June 2 meeting. Ahtisaari opened the meeting by declaring, "We are not here to discuss or negotiate," after which Chernomyrdin read aloud the text of the plan. (4) Ahtisaari says that Milosevic asked about the possibility of modifying the plan, to which he replied, "No. This is the best that Viktor and I have managed to do. You have to agree to it in every part." (5) Ristic reports that as Milosevic listened to the reading of the text, he realized that the "Russians and the Europeans had put us in the hands of the British and the Americans." Milosevic took the papers and asked, "What will happen if I do not sign?" In answer, "Ahtisaari made a gesture on the table," and then moved aside the flower centerpiece. Then Ahtisaari said, "Belgrade will be like this table. We will immediately begin carpet-bombing Belgrade." Repeating the gesture of sweeping the table, Ahtisaari threatened, "This is what we will do to Belgrade." A moment of silence passed, and then he added, "There will be half a million dead within a week." Chernomyrdin's silence confirmed that the Russian government would do nothing to discourage carpet-bombing. (6)

The meaning was clear. To refuse the ultimatum would lead to the deaths of large numbers of civilians and total devastation. President Milosevic summoned the leaders of the parties in the governing coalition and explained the situation to them. "A few things are not logical, but the main thing is, we have no choice. I personally think we should accept...To reject the document means the destruction of our state and nation." (7) For Ristic, acceptance meant one thing: "We had to save the people." (8) Three weeks after Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin delivered NATO's ultimatum, Yugoslav Prime Minister Momir Bulatovich explained to both chambers of the Assembly why the government had accepted terms. "Our country was faced with a threat of total annihilation. Through diplomatic mediators and through the media, the aggressors spoke of the future targets to be bombed, including civilian victims counted in the hundreds of thousands." (9)

It did not take NATO long to violate the peace agreement that Ahtisaari had delivered to Milosevic. While NATO dawdled over entering Kosovo, the secessionist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) went on a rampage, looting and burning homes, murdering and expelling thousands of Serbs, Roma, Turks, Slavic Muslims, Gorans, Egyptians, Croats and pro-Yugoslav Albanians. Milosevic was livid, and shortly after midnight on June 17, he phoned Ahtisaari and complained that NATO's delay in entering Kosovo had allowed the KLA to threaten the population. "This is not what we agreed," he said. (10) It hardly mattered. Once NATO troops entered Kosovo, they did nothing to deter KLA attacks against the populace. The KLA had unimpeded freedom to carry out a pogrom. That summer in Yugoslavia, I heard many refugees tell how attacks had taken place in the presence of NATO troops, who invariably did nothing. On numerous occasions people were thrown out of their homes, threatened, their possessions looted and homes burned while NATO soldiers stood aside and watched.

Ahtisaari's mission was a success. He "was sensational," said a senior U.S. official. Chernomyrdin won praise for remaining silent while Ahtisaari threatened Milosevic. "Chernomyrdin did great," an appreciative U.S. official noted. (11)

The final agreement between Yugoslavia and NATO was spelled out in UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which was implemented in a one-sided way. NATO got everything it wanted, but those aspects of the resolution not to its liking were never implemented. The required demilitarization of the KLA was a sham, with its members handing in obsolete weapons while retaining their arsenal. The resolution also called for the return of some Yugoslav forces to maintain “a presence at Serb patrimonial sites” and at “key border crossings,” as well as to liaise with international forces. NATO never permitted that. Most importantly, the resolution affirmed that the political process of arriving at an agreement on the status of Kosovo would take full account of the “sovereignty and territorial integrity” of Yugoslavia. (12) Instead, Western officials did everything possible to undermine that stipulation.

So pleased were Western leaders with Ahtisaari’s performance in 1999, that they called upon the man once again when it came time to negotiate a solution for the province of Kosovo. They saw to it that Ahtisaari was appointed as special envoy to the UN Secretary General to develop a set of recommendations for the final status of Kosovo.

U.S. officials were repeatedly promising secessionist Albanian officials in Kosovo that if negotiations with Serbian officials were to fail, then the province would be granted independence. This ensured that the Albanian delegation was unwilling to compromise or engage in serious negotiations. The Albanians’ maximal demands would be met as long as they could avoid a negotiated settlement. Ahtisaari’s role was to develop the plan for Kosovo’s final status that would be implemented if lieu of an agreement. In the end, secessionist Albanian leaders unilaterally declared independence, which was quickly followed by U.S. and Western European recognition. Yet much of Ahtisaari’s plan provided the basis for the agreement that was implemented between the province and the U.S.

Not surprisingly, Ahtisaari’s plan called for independence. This was to be supervised by “the international community,” that term that seems always to mean Western leaders and their interests and excludes the vast majority of the world’s population. Interestingly, the Ahtisaari plan required that Kosovo “shall have an open market economy with free competition.” (13) Already by this point Western officials in Kosovo had overseen the privatization of much of Kosovo’s socially owned property. Ahtisaari’s inclusion of the phrase “free competition” appears meant to protect the interests of Western investors. U.S. officials are never reluctant to push their own agenda, whatever noble-sounding themes they may trumpet. It may be recalled that the pre-war Rambouillet plan, drawn up by U.S. officials in order to sabotage any possibility of a peaceful outcome, required that “the economy of Kosovo shall function in accordance with free market principles” and allow for the free movement of international capital. (14)

Kosovo’s independence under Ahtisaari’s plan was to be supervised and monitored by Western officials. Kosovo would be required to prepare its budget in consultation with the Western-appointed official responsible for managing the province. The plan called for NATO to maintain its military presence. There was to be “close cooperation” with the IMF, and in regard to the privatization of publicly owned entities Kosovo officials were called upon to “take appropriate measures to implement the relevant international principles of corporate governance and liberalization.” The governing Western official would be “the final authority in Kosovo regarding interpretation” of the plan, and positions would be filled through appointment by Western officials. (15) Under Ahtisaari-influenced plan as implemented by the Western powers, Kosovo has less control over its affairs than it would have had under the plan for full autonomy offered by the Yugoslav delegation at Rambouillet.

The selection of Martti Ahtisaari for the Nobel Peace Prize was a reward for services rendered. This was a purely political statement, meant to underline an important principle in international affairs. The same Western nations that forcibly carved Kosovo from Serbia are vociferously complaining that independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia violates international law and the territorial integrity of Georgia. This year's Nobel Peace Prize affirms the lofty principle that it is only the West that will draw and redraw borders in the manner of 19th-century imperial powers.

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NOTES

- [1] Dana Priest, "The Battle Inside Headquarters: United NATO Front was Divided Within," *Washington Post*, September 21, 1999.
- [2] "Getting to the Table," *Newsweek*, June 14, 1999.
- [3] Interview with Martti Ahtisaari by Riccardo Chiaberge, "Ahtisaari: This is How I Bent Milosevic," *Corriere della Sera* (Milan), July 21, 1999.
- [4] Interview with Ljubisa Ristic by Renato Farina, "Why We Serbs Have Given In," *Il Giornale* (Milan), June 7, 1999.
- [5] Interview with Martti Ahtisaari by Riccardo Chiaberge, "Ahtisaari: This is How I Bent Milosevic," *Corriere della Sera* (Milan), July 21, 1999.
- [6] Interview with Ljubisa Ristic by Renato Farina, "Why We Serbs Have Given In," *Il Giornale* (Milan), June 7, 1999.
- [7] Michael Dobbs and Daniel Williams, "For Milosevic, Internal Battle Just Starting," *Washington Post*, June 6, 1999.
- [8] Interview with Ljubisa Ristic by Renato Farina, "Why We Serbs Have Given In," *Il Giornale* (Milan), June 7, 1999.
- [9] "Yugoslav Prime Minister Momir Bulatovic Address to Both Chambers of the Assembly of Yugoslavia," *Yugoslav Daily Survey* (Belgrade), June 24, 1999. [10] Geert-Jan Bogaerts, "If Democracy Returns then Milosevic will be Gone," *De Volkskrant* (Amsterdam), June 25, 2008.
- [11] "Getting to the Table," *Newsweek*, June 14, 1999.
- [12] Resolution 1244 (1999), UN Security Council, June 10, 1999.
- [13] "Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement," UN Security Council S/2007/168/Add.1, March 26, 2007. [14] "Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo," February 23, 1999.
- [15] "Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement," UN Security Council S/2007/168/Add.1, March 26, 2007.<http://www.counterpunch.org/elich10142008.html>

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