

Kosovo Independence opens up a Pandora's Box: Extended Crisis from the Balkans to the Caucasus

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This article was written before the latest declaration of US President Barack Obama reversing the missile defence system that has been welcomed by Russian PM Vladimir Putin.

The declaration of independence by the Kosovo Assembly in the Muslim majority region of Serbia, on February 17, 2008, has posed serious challenges before the world community. This declaration received conflicting reactions from the international community and is strongly opposed by Serbia which continues to claim Kosovo as one of its provinces.¹

Several countries like the USA, Turkey, United Kingdom, Australia and France have announced their recognition, despite protests from Serbia in the United Nations Security Council. No member country of the CIS, CSTO and SCO has recognised Kosovo as independent. The two permanent members of Security Council, China and Russia, consider it illegal. On the other hand, most of the member countries of the NATO, EU, and OECD have recognised Kosovo as independent.²

Serbia has been Russia's Slavic Orthodox Christian ally for ages. Staying with it on Kosovo was a question of moral vindication for Russia. Following the 11-week bombing of Yugoslavia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1999, which Russia strongly opposed, Moscow persuaded Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic to withdraw from Kosovo, conveying to him a solemn promise by the West that the NATO occupation of the conclave would never lead to its separation from Serbia. Moscow was stung by the West's treachery; it has now vowed to "go as far as Belgrade is prepared to" in opposing Kosovo's independence.³

Russia had warned the West that Kosovo would open a Pandora's Box, setting off separatism and territorial conflicts in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Vladimir Putin, the former Russian President and incumbent Prime Minister, stated that Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and its recognition by the West set a "terrible precedent, which will de facto blow apart the whole system of international relations". It was in this context that Elena Guskova, head of the Balkan Crisis Study Centre, said that "by creating an independent Kosovo, the US has placed a time bomb under European stability". Dr Guskova further stated that the Americans are using the Kosovars to perpetuate their military presence in the Balkans, but the Kosovars are also using the Americans to pursue their goal of Greater Albania.⁴

Russia has rebelled against Kosovo's independence because it sees it as part of US efforts to dismantle the post-Second World War international system based on respect for state sovereignty and inviolability of borders enshrined in the supremacy of the UN in resolving international disputes. Kosovo's independence is also against the Security Council

Resolution 1244 of 1999, which gave the UN jurisdiction over Kosovo, but had explicitly rejected Kosovo's declaration of independence by reaffirming "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia", of which Serbia is the successor state, and calling for "substantial autonomy and meaningful self-administration for Kosovo".⁵

Balkan and US Interests

Despite its so-called declaration independence, Kosovo is set to remain a protectorate of the European Union. This is perhaps what M. Ahtisarri, the UN appointed mediator and former President of Finland, envisaged when he spoke of "supervised independence". It has been noted that such "independence" enables the Americans to maintain a strategic military base at Camp Bondsteel in the breakaway region — the largest American military base to come up in Europe over the last generation.⁶

Moreover, the Americans appear to have plans through AMBO — the Albania, Macedonia, Bulgarian Oil Corporation registered in the US — to build a trans-Balkans oil pipeline. This pipeline, bypassing Russia, will bring oil from the Caspian Sea to terminals in Georgia and then by tanker through the Black Sea to the Bulgarian port of Burgas and then relay it through Macedonia to the Albanian port of Vlora for shipment to refineries in Rotterdam and the US west coast.⁷

Caucasus

The "time bomb" of Dr Guskova finally blasted in the Caucasus when Russia intervened militarily against Tbilisi and broke away two the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian-Georgian relations have been strained for some time over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Abkhazia has been demanding independence while South Ossetia wants to join Russia.⁸

Russia has issued Russian passports to the 80,000 inhabitants of South Ossetia. Russian peacekeepers, nominally under the CIS umbrella, have been present in both regions since 1991. Russia has many grievances vis-a-vis the West. In 2004, Georgia saw a regime-change that brought a pro-US government in power. The NATO's recent offer to Georgia of the Alliance's membership at some future date has annoyed Russia no end.⁹

Russia's confrontation with Georgia appeared to be partly responsible for Moscow's perception that an attack on Iran was in the works. It is now acknowledged that Russia seized control of two airfields in Georgia from where air strikes against Iran were being planned.¹⁰

The Western recognition of Kosovo's independence last year also upset Russia deeply. The West has refused to take heed of Russia's concerns. The US has supported Georgia all these years. This created an impression in Georgia that it enjoys US protection. But during the crisis, the US exercised restraint not to get involved militarily in the conflict.

Apart from pressuring Moscow to fall in line on the Iran nuclear issue, what is the US game-plan? To begin with, Saakashvilli, of course, is a progeny of the "colour revolution" in Georgia, which was financed and stage-managed by the US in 2003. Georgia and the Caucasus constitute a critically important piece of real estate for the US since it straddles a busy transportation route for energy. It can be used as a choke-point. Simply put, keeping it

under control as a sphere of influence is highly advantageous for the pursuit of US geopolitical interests in the Eurasian region. The rollback of Russian influence therefore becomes a desirable objective.¹¹

With the induction of Georgia, NATO would cross over to the approaches in Asia. The arc of encirclement of Russia gets strengthened. The NATO ties facilitate the deployment of the US missile defence system in Georgia. The US aims to have a chain of countries tied to “partnerships” with the NATO brought into its missile defence system — stretching from its allies in the Baltic to those Central Europe. The ultimate objective of this is to neutralise the strategic capability of Russia and China and to establish its nuclear superiority. The National Defence Strategy document, issued by the Pentagon on July 31, 2008, portrays Washington’s perception of a resurgent Russia and a rising China as potential adversaries.¹²

Issues of Difference

Russian-US differences exist over a range of issues. The US has been accused by Russia of engineering uprisings in former Soviet territories such as through ‘rose revolutions and orange revolutions’. The US has accused Russia of having an undemocratic political structure. The present US-Russia differences arose over US plans to deploy anti-ballistic missiles, citing threats from Iranian missiles, in Czechoslovakia and Poland. Russia views these as a direct source of intervention in Russia’s neighbourhood. Russia in turn suspended the CPE treaty and is demanding a new treaty with the US on the lines of the START. Moreover, they also have differences over the Iranian nuclear issue. Russia is against any punitive action against Iran. The US, on its part, is wary of the development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation into a military block which would challenge the NATO in West and Central Asia.¹³

New Cold War

Has the United States declared a new Cold War on Russia? This question is being asked by Russian politicians and analysts bewildered by a virulently anti-Russian speech former US Vice-President Dick Cheney made at a conference in Vilnius, Lithuania on April 30, 2006. Addressing a meeting of Baltic and Black Sea states, Cheney lashed out at Russia, accusing it of curbing civil liberties and using its energy resources as “tools of intimidation and blackmail”.¹⁴

It was the harshest attack on Russia by a senior member of the US Administration since the closing days of Cold War, when President Ronald Reagan branded the Soviet Union an “evil empire”. Russian commentators compared Cheney’s address to a 1946 speech by British leader Winston Churchill in Fulton, the US, which gave the green light for the Cold War. “The Cold War has restarted, only now the frontlines have shifted (from Eastern Europe to the former Soviet Union),” Russia’s top business daily, Kommersant, said.¹⁵

Russia’s transformation in foreign and security policies has been nothing short of spectacular. After years of humiliation and retreat, Russia has regained its great power status and global role. Putin, the former Russian President, has put Russia on an equal footing with the West. His famous ‘Munich Speech’ in February 2007, where he blasted the US global policies as a disaster and proclaimed the unipolar world dead, underscored Russia’s return to the international stage as a leading power. Its international standing is probably higher today than during the best of Soviet times. Respected US scholar Stephen

F. Cohen, a Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, defines the US policy towards Russia as an “undeclared Cold War Washington has waged, under both parties (Democrats and Republicans), against post-communist Russia during the past 15 years”.¹⁶

Moscow’s message to the West is that resurgent Russia will no longer tolerate being treated as the Cold War loser. “To be honest, not everyone was ready to see Russia begin to restore its economic health and its position on international stage so rapidly,” Putin told the Russian ambassadors meeting in August 2006. He further stated that “some still see us through the prism of past prejudices and, as I said before, see a strong and reinvigorated Russia as a threat”.¹⁷

Barack Obama’s pledge to “reset” relations with Moscow is a good effort towards normalisation of US-Russian relations but, from Moscow’s perspective, the main problem of Russian-American relations is that even though the Cold War ended 20 years ago the US has continued to treat Russia as an enemy, pushing the NATO to Russia’s borders, surrounding it with a ring of military bases and supporting patently anti-Russian leaders in former Soviet states. Writing in Newsweek ahead of Obama’s Moscow summit, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said it “will take time” to overcome the “the crisis of trust” that had developed between the two countries in recent times.¹⁸

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