

The Internationals and the Balkans: Time for Change?

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Is the international presence in the Balkans in need of restructuring – or major surgery?

NATO leaders meeting in Istanbul this week announced the end of a mission that has provided security in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the Dayton peace deal came into force in December 1995.

While NATO will maintain a lower-key presence, helping detain war crimes suspects and advising the Bosnian government on defence reforms, its security role will be fulfilled by a new European Union mission from the beginning of next year – the EU's largest and most ambitious military operation to date.

The change coincides with a period of debate and reflection on the role played by international administrators in Kosovo as well as Bosnia. Some commentators believe their record has been questionable, and international engagement should either end or be substantially restructured. Others say a great deal has been achieved despite frequent hitches, and it is far too early to walk away.

To take this debate forward, IWPR presents a discussion, taking the form of an exchange of letters, between two leading commentators who have been closely engaged with the Balkan states over many years - Gerald Knaus of the European Stability Initiative in Berlin and Nicholas Whyte of the International Crisis Group in Brussels.

Dear Nicholas,

Five years after the end of NATO's Kosovo campaign and nearly nine years after the Alliance intervened in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the international military presence in the former Yugoslavia has been scaled back from about 70,000 troops in 1999 to a little over 25,000.

This is a sign that the threat to security has declined and that progress has been achieved. However, the international civilian presence no longer corresponds to the needs of the region, and requires radical restructuring.

I'm sure both of us agree the world has an important role to play in helping the weaker states and entities of the Balkans – Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia – overcome their problems. Neither of us believes the region should be left to its own devices. I suspect both of us also want to see outsiders playing a more proactive role in helping address the one status issue that still remains open, namely Kosovo and, related to it, Serbia and Montenegro.

Moreover, both of us believe the precondition for progress is the containment of any possible hard-security threat. Any international strategy must therefore reassure the citizens of the region that the outside world – whether in the form of a NATO presence or a combination of a NATO and a European Union, EU, presence – will never again tolerate warfare. Aside from this, the benchmark for measuring the success of international intervention should be the progress these countries and entities make towards European integration, that is the extent to which become capable of meeting the requirements for pre-accession talks with the European Union and eventually joining it.

Where I suspect we disagree is in our assessment of the capabilities of the international institutions to address the region's challenges. I believe that parts of the international presence have become ineffective, and in some ways run counter to the goals of Europeanisation and economic development.

Firstly, in both Bosnia and Kosovo, the wide-ranging emergency powers of international organisations constitute an obstacle to democratisation. As long as a High Representative is able to wield so-called "Bonn powers" in Bosnia, enabling him to overrule domestic institutions, impose legislation and dismiss local officials, the country will be unable to become a full democracy. Since the emergency is over in Bosnia, the High Representative should give way by the end of this year to a regular EU Special Envoy without special powers. Likewise, in Kosovo, the intrusive nature of the UN mission risks undermining the development of a multi-ethnic democracy.

Secondly, much of the international presence in the region distorts the institution-building process that needs to take place for governments to become more effective. In both Bosnia and Kosovo, the international community crowds out domestic institutions, hiring many of the most qualified young people at salaries that neither the public nor the domestic private sector can ever pay.

Across the region, most so-called institution-building and democratisation efforts are ad hoc, badly designed and ineffective. In the protectorates, fundamental strategy in most areas changes every two years (sometimes sooner) as key people in the international missions change. What is lacking is continuity.

I have two concrete suggestions. First, we need to bring the protectorate in Bosnia to an end and reduce the influence of the one in Kosovo. Bosnia should be treated no differently to Macedonia, where a protectorate has never been established.

In Kosovo, the reserved powers of the international community should be nominal, and should reflect the emerging political dynamics. After the upcoming elections, the United Nations should get out of the direct management of economic matters, and concentrate on such tasks as building a multi-ethnic Kosovo interior ministry. It should also focus on pushing Kosovo institutions to meet two key standards, the return of all property to the displaced and the provision of effective security to all citizens. The United Nations – and KFOR – must ensure they are prepared for any outbreaks of violence such as took place in March.

Secondly, we should replace the current ad hoc international arrangements with a much clearer, European-driven, pre-accession process. This would entail a stronger European Commission presence in each country, a focus on issues of economic and social cohesion and pre-accession financial instruments to target causes of structural underdevelopment and national absorption capacity (such as the Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development or the Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession).

From 2007, every southeast European state that concludes a Stabilisation and Association Agreement should be offered full access to pre-accession programmes. Assistance levels and funds should be sufficient to ensure that the gap between present candidate countries such as Bulgaria and Romania and the future candidate countries does not widen.

The lasting stabilisation of the region will come with its European integration. The immediate stabilisation will come when the local elites realise that this prospect is real.

Yours,

Gerald

Dear Gerald,

I don't differ with you on the medium- to long-term strategic aim of the international community in the Balkans – full integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

However, I think you have underplayed the importance of the remaining hard-security threats in the Balkans. In Bosnia, so long as the most notorious war criminals remain at large, it seems premature to declare that “the emergency is over”. This is not a mere technicality. It is fundamentally important not just to prevent future warfare, but also to establish that the credibility of Bosnia as a state will not be challenged again, and that those who were responsible for the worst of the wartime atrocities will be punished.

The emergency is certainly in a different phase, but as long as state structures are protecting these people I do not think it is over.

I agree that other things are going in the right direction in Bosnia. State-level defence, intelligence, police and indirect taxation institutions are all essential before the international community can start scaling down its presence. These welcome developments now appear imminent – but this could not have been achieved without the sort of muscular international intervention that we have had since Dayton.

You imply that the presence of a High Representative with “Bonn powers” has been a brake on recovery. I think it was essential to get us this far. Do you think an international withdrawal from Bosnia in 1997 would have resulted in a peaceful, democratic and prosperous country by 2004?

I have greater sympathy with your remarks on Kosovo, where economic powers were assumed by the international community from the start, and should be transferred to local actors as soon as possible. Nobody should underestimate the potential explosiveness of the demographic time-bomb represented by Kosovo's two million population, half of whom are under the age of 20, in a situation where unemployment is endemic and the traditional safety valve of emigration is blocked by the European Union's Schengen frontier. It seems strange that we insist on the peoples of the Balkans acquiring European values, yet block them from coming to the European Union to learn about those values.

Unfortunately, to most Kosovo politicians, these economic matters are mere window-dressing compared with the burning issue of future relations with Belgrade – and if their voters think differently, they have failed to indicate it in elections. To talk of downsizing the international presence in Kosovo without factoring in the single most important reason why we are there – the dispute over its sovereignty – is to ignore the elephant in the living room.

Transfer more powers to locally elected representatives by all means. But the real test of credibility of the UN Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, will be its ability to manage the path to final status over the next year or so. And the big test for the international presence there in the next few months may simply be to maintain the security situation.

The Macedonian example is instructive of the value of a sustained and serious international engagement. Without the direct personal involvement of EU and NATO officials, the situation would have deteriorated into another large-scale conflict. And the continued presence of an EU Special Representative in Skopje has been an important stabilising factor since the 2001 crisis.

That points up the advantages of establishing a more visible international presence in Belgrade, which is again enduring the political chaos of presidential elections, with a reshaping of the Serbian government likely to follow. The hard-security questions of accountability for war crimes and democratic control of the security services also remain salient in Serbia.

The experience of having a High Representative or a Special Representative (something more than the “stronger Commission presence” you propose) in Bosnia and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia has ensured the international community was able to speak with one voice and that local actors were not able to go “forum-shopping”. It is also important to have the right policy objectives in the first place. As long as the international community – the European Union in particular – remains wedded to the futile policy of implementing the State Union between Serbia and Montenegro, progress in both countries can be expected to be slow.

The two countries that do not have the same unresolved hard-security issues – Albania and Croatia – are instructive of the limits of external engagement. In Croatia, a clear decision has been made by all sections of the political elite to move forward. Albania, on the other hand, remains hampered by the unwillingness of its leaders to engage in meaningful reforms.

In both cases we have seen a rejection of the 19th-century game of territorial aggrandisement in favour of the 21st century game of international integration. That is a political decision, not an economic one. But it’s one that is made by the elites of the countries, rather than by the European Union and the international community. You can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. In countries where governments are not prepared to move forward, the European Union should not be compelled to offer additional carrots rather than more sticks.

Yours,

Nicholas

Dear Nicholas,

Let me answer your direct questions first. In 1997, there was a need for an assertive international role in Bosnia and Herzegovina and withdrawal then would have been a disaster. Bosnia in 2004 is a very different country. In 1997, people who have since been indicted for war crimes controlled the interior ministry, the presidency and the army. In 1997, not a single Bosnian Muslim had returned to Republika Srpska.

At this moment, the process by which more than 220,000 properties are being returned to pre-war owners is coming to conclusion. Mosques are being rebuilt in Republika Srpska. Indicted war criminals are in The Hague or in hiding. This is why the vast international powers assumed in 1997 are neither needed nor suited to today.

You are right to insist that Karadzic and Mladic need to be brought to justice, but this hardly justifies a permanent international institution able to overrule politicians elected by Bosnian citizens. The most appropriate response to the tragedy of the Nineties is a democratic, multi-ethnic country on the path to EU integration. This is not a long-term strategic aim, as you put it: I would like to see the present Bosnian government follow Ankara, Skopje and Zagreb and submit an official application to the European Union before the end of 2006.

Let me pose a direct question to you: why is the mechanism that you praise for Macedonia – a respected EU special envoy, an international police mission that focuses on capacity building, plus a realistic European perspective for a fully sovereign country – not suited to Bosnia?

Ankara and Skopje have achieved tremendous progress and carried out painful and sensitive reforms in recent years as a result of, not despite, democracy. Bosnia has also achieved progress, but as long as the “Bonn powers” exist, its people will not get the credit for that. Many observers will always argue – as you do – that no progress would be possible “without muscular international intervention”. You could continue to make this argument for another decade.

I’m not sure how much we disagree on the international role in Kosovo. Let me ask you directly: would you support the establishment of a multi-ethnic Kosovo interior ministry and then make the protection of minorities the key standard that Kosovo institutions – and not only, as at present, an internationally-led UNMIK pillar – must meet? Giving local institutions responsibility for providing security for minorities has always involved a leap of faith, but it has worked well in Bosnia, Macedonia and in the Presevo valley in southern Serbia. Making institutions accountable to the people they serve produces better outcomes.

I doubt most Kosovo politicians would regard economic matters as “mere window dressing”. However, as long as UN lawyers argue, for example, that giving licences to investors to extract minerals may be in breach of the UN mandate in Kosovo, there is a link between its status and its prosperity. By this autumn Kosovo may find itself in the absurd situation where the “Kuwait of lignite” cannot legally mine its own coal to supply its own power station. This is why UNMIK must change the way it interprets its role as trustee, and it must do so now. It is, after all, trustee on behalf of the Albanians, Serbs and others who live in Kosovo, whose economic plight grows more desperate by the day.

Yours,

Gerald

Dear Gerald,

The idea that the Office of the High Representative, OHR, in Bosnia and Herzegovina is now or could ever become “a permanent international institution” is a straw man. Nobody advocates that it should be everlasting, certainly not the present holder of the office – in almost every utterance, he has made it clear the task is finite.

Speaking to the UN Security Council after the 2002 elections, he said, “My approach will be to distinguish ruthlessly between those things that are truly essential and those that are simply desirable. The OHR, with the executive power it wields, should focus on the first. There are many other agencies to undertake the longer-term, developmental tasks once we have gone.”

The question is not whether the OHR should hand over to something resembling the international regime in Skopje, but when. You seem to think the ideal moment would have been between 1997 and 2004, though you don’t say what date or why. I think it will not be this year, but it could and should be within another year or two.

The situations are different. The August 2001 Ohrid agreement which ended the Macedonian conflict reaffirmed the state’s structures and provided mechanisms for embedding the Albanian minority more

securely within that state. The leaders of the 2001 insurgency now proclaim their commitment to integration of their people with the rest of the country.

That was not the case after the Bosnian conflict. The Dayton Peace Agreement established a constitutional system in which all the incentives were for the leaders of the three national groups to build three different polities and to ignore or weaken the central state. War crimes indictees remain under the protection of the security forces of parts of the Bosnian state. The destruction of Bosnian democracy was caused not by the High Representative but by the war.

When the Bosnian state has the same level of credibility with its own people that the former Yugoslav state of Macedonia has, the transition to a Macedonian level of engagement will be appropriate. I don't think that day is far off and I observe that the OHR is planning for it. It certainly should not be many years before Sarajevo's application for EU membership is submitted.

I wish I shared your confidence that Kosovo politicians regard economic development as more than window-dressing. Any snapshot of press reporting of their statements will show that comments on big-picture political issues (over many of which they have no formal control) outnumber those on substantive economic issues by two to one. Moreover, half of the economic statements concern the extraordinary legalistic cul-de-sac that the UN administration has got itself into on privatisation.

I'm happy to agree with you that UNMIK's interpretation of its trusteeship mandate is far too restrictive in the economic field. I also agree on the need to empower the Kosovo Protection Corps to protect Kosovo's citizens of whatever ethnicity, though I think you skate over the problems experienced in the return of refugees elsewhere in the Balkans. The key factor determining the success of returns in Bosnia has not been the level of local ownership and accountability of the security forces, but whether those who drove out the displaced people in the first place have been held accountable

Yours,

Nicholas

Dear Nicholas,

I suggest substantially reinforcing the multi-ethnic Kosovo Police Service, not the Kosovo Protection Corps, which has much lower credibility among Kosovo Serbs. Otherwise, we agree the United Nations needs to devolve more powers, and quickly. The priority in Kosovo should be local institution-building in the security sphere and a campaign to allow displaced persons to repossess their property. Kosovo needs a real government to confront its economic and social crisis.

Let me be precise about my proposal for Bosnia. By the end of this year the "Bonn powers" should be revoked. Lord Ashdown should be the last High Representative. There should not be another flurry of last-minute impositions towards the end of this year, as was the case in the months before his predecessors left office. A fully sovereign Bosnian government should aim to begin negotiations for an Association Agreement with the European Union in early 2005.

In general, the international presence should look very different in 2006. Everywhere, democratically elected governments should be in charge of governance. Everywhere, the primary focus in security should be to strengthen the capacity of and multi-ethnic domestic police forces. Everywhere, the European

Commission's presence should be reinforced, focusing on setting European standards and helping domestic institutions meet them.

In Skopje and Zagreb, EU membership negotiations should be in full swing. What Pristina and Sarajevo need are governments capable of taking responsibility. One cannot teach political elites to run a marathon by attempting to carry them towards the finishing line.

Yours,

Gerald

Dear Gerald,

Certainly one should not carry the runners to the finishing line - the problem has been getting them to the starting line!

We should not set dates for the sake of setting dates. Much better to define the tasks that need to be done for the mission to be declared complete. Lord Ashdown expects to have substantially completed those tasks in Bosnia by this time next year. I don't believe value is added to the process by introducing further urgency. In any case, the end of this year is also the likely date that the European Union takes over from NATO as the main security provider in Bosnia, and it is surely more prudent not to change everything at once.

While I agree about the desirable shape of the international presence in 2006, I remain worried that we do not actually know what the shape of the region's borders will be. The one thing missing from your prescription for Kosovo is a sense of movement towards resolving its final status. The vague promise of a mid-2005 "review" made by the Contact Group last November is a step, but it needs to be made more substantive. Without this, all the effort invested in institution-building and economic development will be worth nothing.

I'll note in closing that a continued NATO presence in Kosovo is going to be necessary for several years.

Yours,

Nicholas

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Location: [Balkans](#)
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