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A Kosovar Army? Now Is the Time for U.S. Leadership

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Following the sectarian wars of the 1990s, Kosovo, a small country in the western Balkans, was placed under United Nations administration in June 1999. On February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia and has to date been recognized by 114 countries, including all of its neighbors in the Balkans aside from Serbia, as an independent, sovereign nation.[1]

Since 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has kept a peacekeeping force in Kosovo, the Kosovo Force (KFOR), as authorized by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1244. Today, more than a decade after declaring independence, many leaders in Kosovo want to transform its current Kosovo Security Force (KSF), which is mostly responsible for crisis response and lightly armed, into the Kosovo Army, with heavier weapons, a move strongly opposed by Serbia. The U.S. has invested much blood and treasure in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War, and the region continues to be an area of potential instability; it is therefore in America's interest to take a clear position on the issue of a potential national army in Kosovo.

As a starting point, the U.S. should firmly state that Kosovo has the right to develop a professional army as an independent, sovereign nation state. In addition, the U.S. should support steps to develop an army within the legal confines set by Kosovo's constitution. U.S. support should be conditioned on successful implementation of further governance and rule of laws reforms. Finally, any future Kosovo Army must be developed in consultation with NATO, should adhere to NATO standards, and aim for interoperability with Alliance nations.

Security in Kosovo

UNSC Resolution 1244,[2] adopted on June 10, 1999, authorized the establishment of an international security presence "with substantial North Atlantic Treaty Organization participation"[3] in Kosovo. Two days later, the first elements of NATO's KFOR entered Kosovo.[4] Today, the KFOR peacekeeping force maintains 4,031 troops from 28 contributing nations inside Kosovo, and is responsible for overall security in the nation.[5] At the mission's height, the U.S. had 19,000 troops in Kosovo. Today the number is 685.[6]

UNSC Resolution 1244 also provided for the demilitarization of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a process that was overseen by KFOR. Many former members of the KLA were integrated into the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) a civilian emergency service agency established in September 1999 to provide disaster response services, perform search and rescue, provide humanitarian assistance, assist in demining, and help to rebuild infrastructure.[7] Other members of the former KLA were integrated into a new police force or left the security sector altogether.[8]

Upon gaining independence, Kosovo adopted a constitution that created the mentioned Kosovo

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Security Force (KSF), under civilian control, and structured to reflect the ethnic diversity of the country.[9] In January 2009, the KSF, was established[10] as a lightly armed, 2,500-strong force "tasked with crisis response, civil protection and ordinance disposal"[11] reaching initial operating capacity by September that year.[12] KFOR played a key role in standing down KPC, and helping stand up the KSF.[13]

In March 2014, then-Prime Minister Hashim Thaci announced a plan to transform the KSF into a national army of 5,000 soldiers and 3,000 reservists.[14] Attempts to amend the constitution to allow creation of an army in 2014 were scuttled after parliamentarians from minority Serb parties boycotted the vote.[15]

Constitutional Changes

Kosovo's constitution provides for creation of a professional security force;[16] however, it does not provide for creation of a national army. Changing the constitution requires support of two-thirds of all members in Kosovo's unicameral assembly as well as two-thirds support from members who represent ethnic minority parties.[17]

In March 2017, President Hashim Thaci attempted to circumvent this high-threshold obstacle by submitting a bill to the congress that would have de facto formed an army by upgrading the KSF with heavy weaponry, and which could have been approved by a majority vote.[18] International pressure, including from the United States, which stated that passing the bill "would force us to re-evaluate

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our...longstanding assistance to Kosovo's security forces,"[19] eventually convinced Kosovo's government to abandon the plan. By October 2017, Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj stated that the government would seek the creation of an army through amendments to the constitution.[20]

An Army in Kosovo: U.S. Leadership Required

The U.S. cannot afford to stay on the sidelines for an issue as potentially fraught as the creation of an independent army in Kosovo. Therefore, the U.S. should:

Continue to affirm Kosovo's right to create a national army. As an independent, sovereign nation, Kosovo has a right to an army in order to defend its territorial integrity. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Wess Mitchell was correct in March 2018 when he stated, "We support Kosovo's legitimate right to have a professional security capability,"[21] and that "[n]o one can have a veto on Kosovo's ability to develop those capabilities." The U.S. should continue to strongly affirm Kosovo's right to have an army, despite objections from Serbia and Russia.

- **Provide support for the development of an army in Kosovo.** The U.S. should support steps to develop an army within the legal confines set by Kosovo's constitution. In addition, the U.S. should work to ensure that an army in Kosovo serves as a national institution for all Kosovars regardless of ethnicity.

- **Continue to support the Kosovo Security Force through training.** The U.S. should continue to exercise with the KSF, and look for opportunities to take part in bilateral and multilateral exercises with any Kosovo army that is established.

- **Make U.S. support for a Kosovar army contingent on governance and rule of law reforms.** The U.S. should outline the governance and rule of law reforms it would like to see as a precondition for its support of an army in Kosovo. Wielded effectively, U.S. support should be a potent tool for fighting corruption, ensuring responsible procurement, ensuring strong civilian oversight of the army, and strengthening the rule of law in Kosovo.

- **Encourage an open and transparent dialogue with neighboring nations.** While not necessary for establishing a national army, Kosovo should have an open and transparent dialogue with neighboring nations that recognize its independence, to make clear that an army would be a defensive force only.

- **Ensure that creation of a Kosovar army is done in close consultation with NATO.** Even if an independent army in Kosovo is created, it alone will be unable to ensure peace and stability in the nation for the foreseeable future. NATO forces in Kosovo will continue to remain the hearthstone of Kosovo's security; therefore, the creation of a Kosovar army must be done in close consultation with NATO.

- **Stay committed to NATO's KFOR mission.** Ethnic tensions are increasing in Kosovo, especially in the ethnic Serb areas north of the Ibar River, often stoked by Russia. With the potential for conflict, the U.S. needs to ensure that the KFOR mission continues with robust U.S. participation.

- **Keep U.S. and NATO interoperability in mind.** Ensuring that Kosovo's army adheres to NATO standards and is interoperable with allied forces will assist Kosovo in the future should it seek NATO membership, which would in turn contribute to regional security.

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Conclusion

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and the U.S. has spent billions of dollars in aid there—all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. Now is not the time to squander that investment and sacrifice. The U.S. should show leadership on the issue of Kosovo creating an army, reaffirming Kosovo's right to have an independent army, while helping to ensure that such an army contributes to peace and stability in the region, rather than detracting from it.

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