

Through a series of reports recently published by respected think tanks and related organizations, a consensus has emerged: the US cannot afford to ignore the Western Balkans. With Kosovo, specifically, the consensus is:

- Continued presence of US military is required**
- A greater defense capability should be established**
- Serbia must recognize Kosovo before admittance into the EU**
- Russian provocation cannot be ignored**

Following are excerpts from the reports:

“Time for Action in the Western Balkans: Policy Prescription for American Diplomacy,” published by the East West Institute and National Committee on American Foreign Policy, May 2018

<https://www.eastwest.ngo/sites/default/files/Time-for-Action-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

Key points regarding the Western Balkans:

- The Western Balkans matter because they are a European vulnerability – conflict there spills into European politics and erodes European security.**
- Why a call for American action now? The dangers of continued inaction are too great to wait for the lesson to be taught anew that a failure to deal with incipient dangers will invariably require a far greater U.S. commitment when crises erupt full-blown.**
- The United States and the E.U. should counter Russian interference by (i) re-affirming the continued opportunity for Western Balkans countries to attain membership in the E.U. or NATO, or both, (ii) countering Russian media manipulation with objective alternative sources of information and support for independent media in the region, and (iii) cooperating with NATO and E.U. efforts to promote cyber- security.**

Key recommendations regarding Kosovo

- To stop the slow slide to a frozen conflict, the United States should encourage the E.U. to revitalize the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. The dialogue must lead to Serbia’s recognition of Kosovo as an independent state. The U.S. should be prepared to accept measures that the parties agree to as part of their normalization of relations.**

-- NATO should work with Kosovo to develop a small, lightly-armed, defensive military capability. The process of launching this force must involve dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, but under no circumstances should Serbia enjoy a veto in the process.

-- KFOR should remain in Kosovo, but a permanent NATO or U.S. base in the region would needlessly provoke Serbia and Russia and is unnecessary.

“Balkans Forward: A New US Strategy for the Region,” published by the Atlantic Council, November 2017

http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/Balkans_Forward_web_1128.pdf

Key points regarding the Western Balkans:

-- The Western Balkans is a region in flux. As the United States and Europe focus on internal concerns, Russia and other countries are reshaping the geopolitical landscape across the region. Meanwhile, a new generation of investors and entrepreneurs are primed to breathe new life into stagnant economies, but crime and corruption remain entrenched in the political and economic spheres, preventing successful implementation of needed reforms and endangering political support in Europe for further integration.

-- Without the traditional mix of constraints and inducements provided by the West since the late 1990s, the Western Balkans have become a much more dangerous place. Pervasive political and economic stagnation is exacerbating long-simmering grievances, and is undermining trust in the rule of law and democratic forms of government.

-- For its part, the United States has mostly watched from afar in recent years, thinking that the Europeans had these matters mostly in hand. US diplomats have played crucial roles at key moments. Yet, the region continued its slide down the US political agenda. Unfortunately, a policy of benign neglect is no longer sufficient.

Recommendations for US action:

-- Establish a permanent US military presence in Southeastern Europe

-- Pursue a “historic” rapprochement with Serbia

-- Regain the United States’ reputation as an honest broker

**“A Roadmap for Strengthened Transatlantic Pathways in the Western Balkans,”
published by the Heritage Foundation, March 16, 2018**

<https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/BG3286.pdf>

Key points regarding the Western Balkans:

- The Western Balkans remain Europe’s tinderbox, and U.S. engagement and leadership will prove critical in ensuring the box does not ignite.
- In recent years the Western Balkans have been seen as a challenge to be outsourced to Europe. Taken attention from the U.S. – and oftentimes from our European allies – has allowed problems to fester and has provided opening for nefarious actors to exploit.
- The Western Balkans are squeezed between the threats from Russian destabilization, growing attempts by China to gain an economic and political foothold in the region; and risks from radical Islamic terrorism, exacerbated by the migrant crisis.
- The Trump Administration should put an end to the U.S. policy of imposing “progressive” social policies on the Western Balkans that are contrary to the cultural and religious norms of these nations.

Key points regarding Kosovo:

- Russia does not want to see Kosovo as a successful nation pointed toward the West. Rather, Russia seeks to derail Kosovo’s efforts to integrate into the West, oftentimes utilizing grievances of the Serbian minority to cause problems.
- Stay committed to NATO’s KFOR mission. Ethnic tensions are increasing in Kosovo, especially in the ethnic Serb areas north of the Ibar River. With the potential for conflict present, the U.S. needs to ensure the KFOR mission continues.

“The Unraveling of the Balkans Peace Agreements,” published by the Council on Foreign Relations, November 8, 2017

<https://www.cfr.org/report/unraveling-balkans-peace-agreements>

Recommendations for US action:

The Trump administration needs to act urgently to preserve Balkan peace and stability, prevent unraveling of the region’s peace agreements, and seek to complete peace processes already begun by leading a major diplomatic effort to resolve the remaining issues. This approach will necessarily involve deeper U.S. diplomatic involvement in Balkan issues and state-building than this administration would like, but the alternative is to risk further Muslim radicalization, refugee flows, and Russian troublemaking that would distract European allies from higher U.S. priorities.

While continuing to rely on EU cooperation, leverage, and resources, the United States should selectively retake the lead in the Balkans with the following steps:

--Reiterate with the European Union, and if feasible with Russia, the United States’ irreversible commitment to existing Balkan borders and states.

--Develop in cooperation with European partners new incentives for Balkan countries, including enhanced access to U.S. markets and accelerated EU membership.

--Jointly sanction Balkan leaders who threaten democracy, peace, and security by blocking individuals from traveling in the European Union and United States or utilizing their financial systems.

--Publicly enunciate a planned joint response to Republika Srpska’s independence referendum, if it is called.

--Establish a region-wide truth and reconciliation effort that would seek a common understanding of what happened during the conflicts of the 1990s as well as compensation for victims.

--Reorient assistance to the rule of law, with a focus on fighting corruption, trafficking, and extremism.

--Enhance democratization resources and activities.

--Consider redeployment of U.S. and EU troops to maximize their deterrent effect.

--Appoint a U.S. special envoy for the Balkans.

--Strengthen U.S. efforts to counter Russian hybrid warfare.

These recommendations, if implemented, would serve to preserve peace and stability, protect U.S. interests, and limit Russian troublemaking in the Balkans. They would also complete peace processes that have the potential to make the region secure, prosperous, and friendly to the United States and Europe.

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

Daniel Kochis and Luke Coffey

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 established¹⁰ 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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