



KOSOVO

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UN chief signals shift on Kosovo

By Richard Marquand, Christian Science Monitor
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For 16 months, Russia and the West have been a bit eyeball-to-eyeball in the United Nations Security Council over the status of Kosovo. But to borrow Dean Rusk's famous phrase during the 1963 Cuban missile crisis, it appears that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon has just blinked.

Mr. Ban's concession on Friday appeared to brush aside Russia's objections and clear the way to end the nine-year "UNMIK" mission in Kosovo. Last week, Pristina authorities inked a milestone constitution, following a February declaration of independence.

For much of the past nine years, Kosovars described themselves as bystanders in their own fate; the future of this gritty city was controlled by Moscow, Washington, Brussels, and New York. A UN departure may begin to change that.

"Ban Ki Moon has clearly moved closer to the position of those states that recognize Kosovo, but from the Serb position, they've got what they wanted," says James Lyon of the International Crisis Group in Belgrade. "They have de facto taken Kosovo north of the Ibar River."

To be sure, Serbs strongly contest Kosovo. On Friday, a parliament of Kosovo Serbs will meet, backed directly by Belgrade. The body, considered illegal by Western officials, will coordinate Serb agencies, police, security, and even Ministry of Defense offices. It remains an open question whether the European Union can enter the largest enclave, Mitrovica.

"What will not be helpful is to push this problem off," says a senior Western diplomat affiliated with an international agency. "We don't want Kosovo as an international ward for years to come.... Drift contributes not just to instability in Kosovo. It contributes to Serb instability, [which is] the problem in the region."

Kosovo is a "second tier" priority for the United States and the West at a time of an Iran-Israel crisis, the Iraq war, and Afghanistan. Yet the dispute pits key principles in international affairs – state sovereignty against the relatively new concept of self-determination for the Kosovars. It is seen as a test of whether the Balkans can integrate into Europe – or are destined to devolve into nationalistic groups.



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On Friday at a special Security Council meeting, Ban described the Kosovo problem as the most difficult of his diplomatic career.

Lacking Security Council authority, the question of the UN in Kosovo had come down to Ban's authority as an arbiter, with Moscow saying he couldn't pull the UN out of the country without the Security Council, and most Western diplomats saying he could. Ban said Kosovo's newly declared independence created "profound new realities" on the ground. "It is ... the view of the United Nations that [a reconfiguration] constitutes the best possible way in order to manage the situation in Kosovo...."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in a June 19 speech that Russia's internal developments have been a contributing factor, despite cooperation in many key areas. "[T]here is some disappointment that we have not been able to move closer to the common values with Russia that one would have thought possible in 2000," Ms. Rice said. "In fact, it is the internal development of Russia away from a more democratic course that has been, in some ways, the hardest part of managing the relationship."

Even a year ago it was possible to talk about a orderly, nonviolent, and relatively low-cost resolution of Kosovo. After nine years, the UN would leave, the EU would come in. The "last chapter" of the Balkan chaos would close – an end to a decade of a bloody "Greater Serbia" campaign by Serb strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

Yet in a fateful miscalculation, diplomats admit Moscow never agreed to vote affirmatively in the Security Council – bringing confusion and bickering among allies. Moscow's diplomatic maneuvering has cost little; the West, in comparison, has spent billions.

"You don't have a Security Council resolution, so you have the Spanish and Greeks opposing progress. You don't have Serbia isolated," said a Western diplomat, one of several interviewed off the record in Pristina. "We've got a customs house burned down in February by the Serbs that no one at NATO has asked to rebuild."

Lacking Security Council approval, the complications faced by the Kosovars has strained its capability, talent, and preparedness.

"We thought we'd have a quick launch, Security Council approval, and that Kosovo would be well down the road toward establishing itself. Instead, we well have to muddle through," another Western official said.

"Kosovo was thrown a screwball by Serbia," argues Mr. Lyon, "No one expected Serbia to be able to stymie the Security Council, no one expected Russia to go to the mat for Serbia, or for Serbs to so vehemently insist on parallel institutions in their enclaves."



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Currently, instead of the more than 100 nation recognition that sources say the US government told Kosovo it would secure, only 43 nations have so far signed on ahead of a General Assembly meeting in September.

The lack of a resolution continues to mean an uphill climb for Pristina, officials say.

Instead of a NATO mission that would now be training police and supporting the new Kosovo government, NATO is still keeping the two sides apart. Instead of an EU mission on the ground, Brussels is working out disputes among members. Instead of a single legal system, there are Kosovar and Serb systems. Instead of an expected isolation of Serbia – Slovakia, Greece, Spain, and Russia are backing Belgrade's attempt to subvert the independence.