



# KOSOVO

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### **The Pandora's box of sovereignty**

By Thomas Meaney and Harris Mylonas, Los Angeles Times  
<http://www.latimes.com/news/printedition/opinion/la-oe-meaney13-2008aug13,0,7688571.story>

For the coolest composure while going to war, the gold medal goes to Vladimir Putin. The Russian prime minister maintained his characteristic calm during Friday's Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing -- giving a firm salute to the Russian athletes marching by -- while he arranged for another kind of march into the disputed territory of South Ossetia. It's clear that Putin considers this payback time, not only for Georgia, Russia's meddlesome neighbor to the south, but for President Bush.

In February, Bush and most European leaders backed the independence of Kosovo from Serbia, which Putin vociferously opposed. Don't worry, assured U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, saying, "Kosovo cannot be seen as precedent for any other situation in the world today." But precedent is exactly what it set. Just as the West wanted to shield Kosovo from Serbian domination, so Putin hopes to free South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgian interference and keep them in the Russian orbit of influence. Thus far, he has succeeded by rolling out tanks while the West has paid only lip service to the territorial integrity of Georgia.

If the United States wishes to avoid carnage like this in the future, we need to be more consistent about how we treat fledgling independence movements. Beyond Kosovo and South Ossetia, why do we encourage the independence of the southern Sudanese but condemn the uprisings of the Kurds in eastern Turkey? Why do we speak up for the Tibetans in China but tune out the Basques in Spain?

Like every great power, the U.S. favors self-determination movements that destabilize its competitors -- Russia, China, Iran -- and opposes (or ignores) ones that might upset our allies. That's the code of realism in foreign policy. But it's also a Pandora's box. If America opts not to respect the principle of national sovereignty, it discourages other world powers from doing so and undermines state sovereignty the world over.

In order to prolong its global influence and enhance the legitimacy of international institutions, the United States should send a clear message that partition is rarely an answer.

We must encourage world leaders to make their ethnic minorities equal partners in government, rather than backing rebels who would carve out states within states like a succession of Russian dolls. In the long run, America's current inconsistency jeopardizes the possibility of ethnic pluralism becoming a universal ideal and a



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workable solution for multiethnic societies. When minorities see independence on the horizon, their incentives for peaceful coexistence rapidly diminish.

Because our nation was founded on the principle of self-determination, we are understandably uncomfortable depriving others of that right. But American independence was based on a doctrine of individual rights, whereas the vast majority of self-determination movements today are based on ethnic group rights. Peoples as different as the Kurds and the Tibetans have made repeated appeals for self-governance in the last decade, but the urgency of their calls relies less on any liberal principle than on the sheer fact of their ethnic preponderance in a region and the violence they have endured.

So what do we do when ethnic minorities such as the South Ossetians, Abkhazians, Kurds, Bosnian Muslims, Kosovo Albanians or Palestinians are forcefully repressed by their host states? The world community has an obligation to protect them, of course. But backing self-determination movements and partitioning existing states is almost never the best policy. Rather, it should be considered an option only when the terms are acceptable to all parties involved.

History shows that host governments -- China, India, Serbia and Sudan, for instance -- are more likely to crack down on ethnic minorities when an internationally backed movement for a new state emerges within their borders. Partitions have typically produced more violence, caused more interstate conflict and spurred more self-determination movements. Our best bet, therefore, is to work with the borders we have, not the borders we want.

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