



# KOSOVO

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## Kosovo Precedent Prevails

By Ted Galen Carpenter, National Interest

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When the United States and its key European allies ignored Russia's protests and recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in February, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice blithely insisted that the Kosovo situation was unique and set no international precedent whatsoever. Prominent members of the foreign policy communities in Europe and the United States echoed her argument.

Moscow's August 26 decision to recognize the independence of Georgia's separatist enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia demonstrates the arrogant folly of that position. In just a matter of months, the Kosovo precedent has backfired on the United States and generated dangerous tensions between Russia and the West.

It is difficult to imagine how Washington and its NATO allies could have more egregiously mishandled the Kosovo situation. Western policy has been a debacle from its beginnings in the early 1990s. When Belgrade attempted to suppress the secessionist campaign by the Albanian majority in Kosovo, NATO intervened with air strikes to compel Serbia to relinquish control of the province to an international occupation force. NATO's actions ignored Moscow's vehement objections and showed contempt for Russia's long-standing interests in the Balkans. The Clinton administration also bypassed the UN Security Council (and, hence, Russia's veto) to launch that military operation, exhibiting further disdain for Russia's prerogatives as a permanent member of the Council and a major power in the international system.

Russian leaders fumed, but Moscow was too weak to do anything but issue futile protests. Ultimately, the NATO powers offered Moscow the sop of a belated UN resolution that professed to recognize Serbia's territorial integrity, which included Kosovo, even though that province had been put under international control. How much that resolution was worth became apparent in 2007 and early 2008 when the United States and the major European Union governments pressed for Kosovo's independence without Belgrade's consent and—once again—without UN Security Council authorization. Moscow warned at the time that such action would set a dangerous international precedent; countries as diverse as China, India, Indonesia, Spain and Greece expressed the same concern. Most ominously, Russian officials specifically cited Abkhazia and South Ossetia as places where the Kosovo precedent could apply.



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Russia has now demonstrated that two can play the game of using military force against another country to detach discontented ethnic enclaves. And the United States and NATO are not able to do much about it.

Rather than escalate the already alarming tensions with Russia, Washington needs to walk back its policy on Kosovo and seek a deal with Moscow. The U.S.-EU position on Kosovo is untenable from the standpoint of both wise diplomacy and basic logic. American officials have put themselves in the awkward position of arguing that quasi-democratic Georgia's territorial integrity is sacrosanct while fully democratic Serbia's is not. Moreover, despite the expectation of leaders in Washington and Pristina that the vast majority of countries would quickly recognize Kosovo's independence, only a meager forty-seven have done so—and most of them are long-standing American allies and clients. The rest of the world still worries about the broader implications of the Kosovo precedent and withholds recognition.

Washington should propose a mutual diplomatic retreat to Moscow, in which the United States would rescind its recognition of Kosovo's independence and urge the Kosovars to accept Belgrade's proposal for a negotiated status of "enhanced autonomy," which comes very close to de facto independence. Russia would be expected to adopt a similar policy with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

If U.S. leaders do not suggest this course, they will face the unpleasant prospect of further demonstrating NATO's inability to do anything effective to reverse Russia's conduct in Georgia. American miscalculations have already underscored the alliance's impotence; it is not a lesson that officials should want to reinforce. Moreover, if Washington and Moscow do not back off from their tenacious positions, relations between the two countries—already in bad shape—may degenerate into a new cold war. Conversely, some common sense and flexibility on the twin secessionist issues could be a catalyst for repairing that important relationship.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.