



# KOSOVO

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## Russia and the Kosovo card

By Charles Tannock

The biggest risks posed by unilateral recognition of Kosovo's independence are in the South Caucasus, a region that abuts the tinderbox of today's Middle East. Here, there is a real danger that Russia may recognise breakaway regions in the South Caucasus, — and back them more strongly than it does now

Look before you leap is as sound a principle in foreign policy as it is in life. Yet, once again, the Bush administration is preparing to leap into the unknown. Even though lack of foresight is universally viewed as a leading cause of its Iraq debacle, the United States (with British backing probable) is now preparing to recognise Kosovo's independence unilaterally — irrespective of the consequences for Europe and the world.

Kosovo has been administered since 1999 by a United Nations mission guarded by NATO troops, although it remains formally a part of Serbia. But, with Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority demanding its own state, and with Russia refusing to recognise UN mediator Martti Ahtisaari's plan for conditional independence, the US is preparing to go it alone. Instead of thinking what Ahtisaari deemed unthinkable, a partition of Kosovo with a small part of the north going to Serbia and the rest linked to the Kosovars ethnic brethren in Albania or a separate state, the US plans to act without the UN's blessing, arguing that only an independent Kosovo will bring stability to the Western Balkans.

That argument is debatable — and the record of the Kosovar government suggests that it is wrong. But the US position is unambiguously misguided in not foreseeing that the "Kosovo precedent" will incite instability and potentially even violence elsewhere.

Why the rush to give Kosovo independence? Many serious disputes have gone unresolved for decades. The Kashmir question has lingered since 1947, the Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus since 1974, and Israel's occupation of the West Bank from 1967. Yet no one is suggesting that unilateral solutions be imposed in these potential flashpoints.

Nevertheless, the US — and most European Union members — argue that Kosovo's situation is *sui generis* and will set no legally binding international precedent. But Russia sees things very differently. Indeed, it may seek to use this precedent to re-establish its authority over the nations and territories that were once part of the Soviet Union.



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Spain and Cyprus with their worries over secessionist-minded regions, are worried by any possible precedent. Romania fears the fallout from Kosovo's unilaterally gaining independence on neighbouring Moldova. The worry is that Russia will unilaterally recognise the breakaway Moldovan territory of Transdnistria, which Russian troops and criminal gangs have been propping up for 16 years.

Ukraine — the great prize in Russia's bid to recapture its former sphere of influence — is also deeply anxious. It fears that Russia will encourage separatist tendencies in Crimea, where the ethnic Russian population forms a majority. (Crimea was ceded to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev only in 1954). Russia may decide to abuse the Kosovo precedent further to divide Ukraine's population between Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers.

But the biggest risks posed by unilateral recognition of Kosovo's independence are in the South Caucasus, a region that abuts the tinderbox of today's Middle East. Here, there is a real danger that Russia may recognise breakaway regions in the South Caucasus, — and back them more strongly than it does now.

Even before Vladimir Putin became Russia's president, the Kremlin was making mischief in Georgia, issuing Russian passports to citizens of Abkhazia (the largest breakaway region) and pouring money into its economy. Russia's supposed "peacekeeping troops" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's other secession-minded region, have in fact protected their rebel governments. Russia has also been enforcing a complete trade embargo on Georgia in the hope of weakening the resolve of its pro-Western president, Mikhail Saakashvili.

Should Russia recognise Abkhazia's independence, Saakashvili might be tempted to respond militarily to prevent his country from unraveling. Renewed conflict in Abkhazia would not only bring the risk of open warfare with Russia, but strain relations with Armenia, as there are near to 50,000 Armenians in Abkhazia who support the breakaway government.

Another risk in the South Caucasus is that Russia (with Armenian support) will recognise Nagorno-Karabakh's self-proclaimed independence from Azerbaijan. Nagorno-Karabakh, historically Armenian, endured a bloody secessionist war between 1988 and 1994, with 30,000 killed and 14% of Azerbaijan's territory occupied by Russian-backed Armenian forces.

Since then, oil has fuelled an Azeri military buildup. So the government in Baku is far more prepared to respond to renewed warfare than it was in the 1990's. Moreover, it has neighbouring Turkey on its side. Turkey is already enforcing a punitive economic embargo on Armenia, including closure of its border.

Military projections by the US have repeatedly suggested that Azerbaijan would lose



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such a battle, even with newly purchased equipment and Turkish military support. Armenian forces are well dug in and have received a significant boost from Russia's diversion of heavy weaponry to Armenia from some recently closed Georgian military bases.

Iran also must be factored into this equation, as it is becoming a strategic investor by building an oil refinery just across its border in Armenia, partly as a security measure in case of a US attack and partly to relieve its petrol shortages. Moreover, Iran remains eager to contain Azerbaijani revanchist claims over the large Azeri minority in northern Iran.

The conflicts in Transdnistria and the South Caucasus are usually called "frozen conflicts," because not much has happened since they began in the early 1990's. Any unilateral move to give Kosovo its independence is likely to unfreeze them — fast and bloodily. And such potential bloodshed on Russia's border may give Vladimir Putin the pretext he may desire to extend his rule beyond its constitutionally mandated end next March. —DT-PS

Charles Tannock is a member of the European Parliament, where he is spokesman on foreign affairs for the British Conservative Party