



KOSOVO

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Calling Putin's Bluff on Kosovo?

Stratfor

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The diplomatic game over Kosovo is taking an interesting shape. Leading EU members have indicated that they are prepared to move forward toward Kosovar independence, while the Kosovar Albanians have said they will declare independence unilaterally. On Dec. 21, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, “The fact is that Kosovo and Serbia are never going to be part of the same state again. I think that’s quite clear. It was the logic even of [U.N. Resolution] 1244 on the special status accorded Kosovo as a result of the war. And the important thing is for these two peoples to get on with their futures.”

Meanwhile, the Russians indicated the same day that they are prepared to consider a long-term EU presence inside of Kosovo, but not in the context of Kosovo’s independence. Russia made it clear that, whatever logic Rice reads into Resolution 1244, in reality it is not a vehicle for granting independence, and Moscow will veto any U.N. resolution that attempts to grant it. There will be no mandate for U.N. action.

NATO, which requires consensus for any action, will not get it either. Greece and Romania will veto — the former out of fear of a follow-on declaration of independence by Turks in Cyprus, and the latter out of fear of a move toward autonomy by Hungarian-dominated regions of Romania. That leaves the European Union as the only multinational vehicle left for blessing Kosovo’s independence, but it is not likely that there will be a unanimous position in favor of independence in Brussels either. Therefore, either the states favoring independence will try to invent a justification for U.N., EU or NATO action, or they will have to act individually without the support of any of these groups.

In the end, these legal maneuvers are of little interest. If the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and France all want independence for Kosovo, it will happen. The diplomats and lawyers will make a good living papering the deal. We have written about the way in which the Russians have backed themselves into a corner in opposing Kosovo’s independence. If the Western countries simply steamroll over the Russian position and Russia does nothing, Russian President Vladimir Putin gets badly hurt politically — something he clearly doesn’t want. Therefore, by our logic, he will not simply shrug and move on.



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The question is, why would the United States and the leading European countries want to risk a crisis over Kosovo? One theory sent to us repeatedly in e-mails is that the West wants to exploit the province's vast wealth of minerals. We have no opinion on these vast deposits, except to say that if they are there, Western companies would be able to exploit them regardless of whether Kosovo is part of Serbia. It doesn't take Kosovar independence to get Belgrade to do business. In fact, if there really were as much wealth as some people say, independence is the last thing the West would want. All the sturm und drang would just delay the gold rush.

Others say it is to show the world that the West can support Muslims in certain cases, and thereby mitigate anti-American and anti-Western feeling in Muslim countries. That is certainly possible, but if that is the intent then we have no doubt it will fail. A gesture of good will in Europe will not change the minds of many Muslims. Indeed, baroque theories (on par with the mineral wealth theory) will be formed rapidly to explain it away.

There are two viable explanations. The first, weaker one, is the idea of bureaucratic inertia. A policy with a certain logic was established in 1999, at a time when Russian sentiment was not relevant. The fact that Russia is a very different place now doesn't register with the foreign policy apparatchiks in the West; they grind onward to the inexorable end with an unstoppable process. That is certainly part of the story, but by the time it reaches Rice's office, that becomes too simple a theory. She could in fact change the plan, as could any of the European leaders.

A more persuasive explanation, because it covers the facts, is that the leaders fully understand that they are backing Putin into a corner — and that is exactly what they want to do. It is becoming clear that they believe that Putin is not going to be able to do anything in response, and so they are hoping to humiliate him, showing that he is all talk and no action.

That is exactly what Putin can't afford, so it follows that he will do something. It then comes down to facts, not wishes. What actions can Putin take, and will he risk them? It is clear that Rice and her European colleagues think he won't. They think he will back down, and the psychology of the former Soviet Union will move away from a sense that a resurgent Russia is inevitable.

Things seem to be in a position in which one player is being backed into a corner from which he must strike, by players who believe he can't strike. That is the configuration of major crises — unless Rice is correct and the Russians are bluffing. Come February, when the Albanians declare independence, everyone will get to flip his cards, and we will see whether Putin is playing a busted flush or whether he has the goods.