

A Glimmer in the Balkans

After 20 years of nation-building in the Balkan countries, a big payoff may be in sight. But it will still be a long time before the United States can declare victory and pull out.

BY MARTIN SLETZINGER

THERE IS A FOLK SAYING IN THE BALKANS THAT encapsulates the region's centuries of struggle. It goes something like this: "We have reached rock bottom, but we continue to dig."

Twenty years after Slovenia and Croatia seceded from the crumbling state of Yugoslavia, touching off a civil war in Croatia followed by bloody conflicts in Bosnia and elsewhere in the region, the digging continues.

For the United States and its European allies, which quickly plunged into efforts to moderate the Balkan conflicts, the past 20 years have produced hard lessons about the limits of good intentions, the perils of trying to rearrange the affairs of other nations, and the limits of nation-building. The allies have been reminded that it is difficult if not impossible for outsiders to forge new multiethnic states chiefly by military means. It takes a long time for contentious ethnic groups to learn to live together, and requires constant prodding, coaching, and reassurance. Outsiders can't stand back if there is to be any

chance of success, but must immerse themselves in local politics.

These lessons are now being reinforced in Iraq and Afghanistan on a much broader scale, but there are two significant differences. United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops never fought a ground war in the former Yugoslavia, arriving as peacekeepers after the fighting was over. And though outsiders, they were operating in a relatively familiar European environment, not a completely alien culture.

Superficially, the situation in the Balkans looks much better than it did only a few years ago. All six countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia are democracies. Slovenia has joined the European Union, Croatia is knocking on the door, and Macedonia and Montenegro have entered the EU accession process. Only Serbia and Bosnia (known formally as Bosnia and Herzegovina) have failed to move ahead. Serbia remains a de facto EU protectorate, its path to EU membership blocked by its failure to hand over two

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In Belgrade, Serbs remember the dead on the 10th anniversary of NATO's 1999 bombing of their country, which finally forced an end to the fighting in Kosovo. Old quarrels never really die in the Balkans, but many Serbs are slowly moving toward acceptance of Kosovo's existence as a separate state.

accused war criminals sought by the international tribunal at The Hague. Bosnia is at peace but has not been able to devise a constitutional structure that satisfies the country's three main ethnic and religious groups. American and EU peacekeepers remain an indispensable presence in both countries.

Under this relatively quiet surface, however, little has changed. The schisms that shattered Yugoslavia and unleashed civil war have been papered over but not resolved. Ethnic and religious conflicts, along with economic backwardness, still plague all but one of the former Yugoslavian republics. (The exception is Slovenia, with its largely homogenous population of ethnic Slovene Catholics and a vigorous export-led

economy.) Ethnic groups throughout the region still hope above all to create their own ethnically pure states by gradually clearing their lands of others or drawing entirely new borders.

During the bloody 1990s, the Americans and Europeans infused their rhetoric with pious appeals for the maintenance of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in the new Balkan states. But where were they in the decade after the death in 1980 of Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito, when Yugoslavia, which was nothing if not multiethnic, was disintegrating? They barely lifted a finger. Then, in 1995, NATO bombed the ethnic Serbs in Bosnia in order to help preserve multiethnicity there. In 1999, NATO

bombed the Serbs in Serbia and Kosovo in the name of preserving a multicultural Kosovo. Croatia, Macedonia, and other new Balkan states were strongly urged to preserve the shaky multiculturalism of their societies.

The sad fact is, however, that despite all these efforts, ethnic diversity is no longer a distinctive feature of most countries in the region. Croatia's population, for example, was once a typical Balkan jumble,

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but after the shooting finally stopped, most of the Serbs living in Croatia, some from families that had lived there for centuries, had fled or been driven out, returning only long enough to sell or barter away their homes to the Croatians. Ironically, the only two states that remain multiethnic are Serbia and Bosnia. Serbia still has sizable minorities of Hungarians, Croats, and Roma (gypsies). Bosnia remains multiethnic in theory, but its two constituent entities, the Muslim-Croat Federation and the Serb Republic, are essentially free of minority groups, since virtually all of the Muslims and Croats who once lived in the Serb Republic have fled or been forced out.

The latest monoethnic bloc to emerge is the breakaway statelet of Kosovo, which is now, since most of its Serbs have fled, 95 percent ethnic Albanian. The legality under international law of its unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008 was disputed, but the United States and most of the EU countries promptly recognized it as a new nation.

From the beginning, the United States and the Europeans have seen Serbia and the Serbs generally as “the problem”—and the Serbs certainly have given them every reason to think so. Because of the bloody Serbian reactions to the seces-

sion of Croatia in 1991 and Bosnia a year later—both with sizable Serbian minorities—the United States and its leading NATO partners (Great Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands) immediately labeled the Serbs as criminal aggressors. Western publics were horrified by the Serbs' violent ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims in Bosnia's Drina Valley, their siege of the Bosnian city of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1996, and the murder of 6,000 Muslim men

and boys in and around the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, to mention just some of the worst offenses. The ranting and general mendacity of Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic and the unsavory personalities surrounding him made it

even easier for the international community, led by the United States, to take a black-and-white view of these interethnic conflicts.

The allies might have been more evenhanded had they seen the Serbs' depredations in historical perspective, as another episode in many rounds of interethnic violence stretching back to the beginning of the 20th century and earlier. From the Serbian point of view (and probably from that of the Serbs' enemies) the events of the 1990s were simply payback. At the same time, the Serbs had special reason to be upset and frightened by the collapse of Tito's Yugoslavia. They made up 40 percent of the country's population and had done the most fighting, dying, and horse trading to help create a new Yugoslavia after World War II. They had the most to lose from its disintegration.

The outsiders also failed to fully appreciate that the Serbs have always been the key local power. An ambitious and hard-nosed people, they established an early medieval empire based in the area that is now Kosovo and over the centuries have stood up to nearly every great empire that has confronted them. The Serbs were the first group in the Balkans to rise up (in 1804) against nearly 500 years of dominion by the Ottoman Empire, ultimately winning a degree of autonomy. They defeated the Hapsburg armies at



Big trouble in small packages: Serbia, the largest of the states that emerged from the wreckage of Yugoslavia, has only 7.3 million inhabitants, followed by Bosnia and Croatia, which each have about 4.5 million.

the beginning of World War I, only to be flattened by the Germans a year later. Under Tito, they stood up to Stalin and in 1948 were cast out of the international communist movement, landing on their feet as a leader of the nonaligned countries (and cooperating closely with the West). Today, Serbia remains the single largest nation in the Balkans, even without the 1.8 million people of Kosovo, and most knowledgeable observers agree there will be no stability or security in the region until the Serbs' legitimate concerns are addressed.

Through three different U.S. administrations, beginning under President Bill Clinton, policymakers harbored a strong anti-Serbian bias. That attitude fueled the U.S. imperative to save Bosnia and Croatia as functioning, legitimate states, even though they

had not existed as self-governing polities since the early Middle Ages—and even though it was clear they were going to become largely minority-free states, in flat contradiction of the allies' stated goals. Now, with the mission still incomplete 16 years after the Dayton Peace Accords ended the war in Bosnia, the nation-building efforts that resulted are faltering, especially in Bosnia, where the United States has spent more than \$2 billion on various aid, institution-building, and reconciliation efforts since 1993. An effort led by the EU to craft a constitutional agreement to bring together the largely autonomous Muslim-Croat Federation and Serb Republic (both established under the Dayton Accords) under a fully functioning central government in Sarajevo has made little progress. To make matters worse, Western

nation-building efforts in Bosnia and Kosovo (where some 2,000 U.S. National Guard troops remain as peacekeepers, along with a larger European contingent) have taken a back seat to the larger and more complex undertakings in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It may be difficult to recall today, when the United States is up to its eyeballs in Afghanistan and Iraq, that for nearly a decade, from 1991 through 2000, the Balkans were the primary focus of U.S. diplomatic and military efforts abroad. Clinton administration officials feared that if NATO could not contain the violence on its eastern flank, within Europe itself, it would become militarily irrelevant in

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The allies' speedy recognition of Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 (on the heels of a report by a UN-appointed mediator calling for a more gradual transition) represents yet another entry on the list of their dubious Balkan achievements. In giving Kosovo their imprimatur, they also recognized the borders of 2008 as legal and inviolable. But those borders were arbitrarily established in 1945 when Tito made Kosovo an autonomous province within Serbia, and he later modified them in an effort, ironically, to artificially increase the Serbian population after it had been depleted during and immediately after World War II. No freely elected parliament ever ratified Tito's borders. Why are they now inviolable?

The Western powers insist that altering Kosovo's borders would have created a dangerous precedent for other

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the post-Cold War world. By coming to the aid of the endangered Muslim population of Bosnia, moreover, they thought they could improve relations with global Islam. Another vain hope. But the anti-Serbian tilt, never openly acknowledged, greatly hampered U.S. efforts to mediate the Balkan conflicts.

The war in Bosnia might have ended significantly sooner had the United States not quietly scuttled earlier attempts at a peace accord on the grounds that any such agreement would legitimate the Serbs' ethnic cleansing in lands they would possess under the settlements—concerns that were largely dropped at Dayton. In the lengthy negotiations over the status of Kosovo, U.S. diplomats adopted a pose of neutrality, but when Kosovo issued its legally questionable declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, the Bush administration, along with the vast majority of EU members, instantly recognized it. (Nobody was fooled by the American claims of neutrality: A central street in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, bears Bill Clinton's name and is graced by a formidable statue of the former president, while in Ser-

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potential breakaways in the region, such as Western Macedonia from Macedonia and, God forbid, the Serb Republic from Bosnia. But it is the West's hasty recognition of Kosovo that has created a dangerous precedent. Seeing how the Serbia-Kosovo border was drawn in the name of establishing a monoethnic state, other states that have significant Albanian minorities—particularly Macedonia, Montenegro, and Greece—must now wonder about the security of their own borders.

These states are painfully aware that Kosovo's independence is bound to feed fuel to the long-simmering passions for a Greater Albania. The ethnic Albanian minority in Macedonia is especially ripe for trouble. Its members, who constitute 20 to 30 percent of Macedonia's population, are crowded into the western part of the country, abutting Kosovo, and they are mostly dissatisfied with their status. Over the horizon lies the frightening prospect of a new Greater Albania incorporating Kosovo, Western Macedonia, and Albania proper. Albania's lead-



Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had a laugh posing last October in front of a statue of former President Bill Clinton in Pristina, Kosovo.

ers vociferously deny any intention of creating such a state, but given all that has been said and written in their country during the past century or more about the dream of what Albanians call Illyria, their claims ring hollow. The Albanians are divided by region, tribe, and religion—about 70 percent are Muslims and 30 percent Christians—but for them, the ethnic identity and language they share come first. And the Albanian diaspora includes many eager nationalists who are willing to lend their considerable financial and political support to the cause, including a significant number in the United States.

While the United States and the Europeans profess to be strongly opposed to the creation of a Greater Albania, it remains to be seen if they have the necessary political will and resources to stop it from emerging. The very prospect of a Greater Albania is a challenge to all the efforts of the past 20 years. How would such an entity, which could fracture three sovereign nations (Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), be a more stable, morally justifiable, and viable state than the Greater Serbia desired by Milosevic, which was no more than the old Yugoslavia in a new guise? Is it for the creation of such a Greater Albania that the EU, the United Nations, and the United States have tried to move heaven and earth these past 20 years?

For the foreseeable future, however, what matters most in the Balkans are the Serbs.

Remarkably, there has been progress on that front. In October, Serbia's government agreed to direct talks with the leaders of Kosovo under EU auspices. The scope of the negotiations has yet to be determined and the Serbs have emphatically stated that recognition of Kosovo's independence is not on the table, but their willingness to talk at all represents a significant shift.

Since the fall of Milosevic in 2000, Serbia's leaders have disagreed over the fundamental choices confronting their country. A more European-oriented camp, led by President Boris Tadic, sees eventual membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions, especially the EU, as the salvation of Serbia. (Tadic's Democratic Party recently reached an agreement with an important opposition party declaring that EU membership must be Serbia's number one goal—a proposition that will be tested

against public opinion in parliamentary elections tentatively scheduled for this year.) Others, such as former prime minister Vojislav Kostunica, do not reject the European option but insist that the first priority must be to retain Kosovo. In pursuit of this goal, leaders on this

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side of the Serbian divide have maintained warmer ties with Russia, with which Serbia shares the Orthodox religion, the Cyrillic alphabet, and not much else. The Russians have repaid them by threatening to veto any effort in the UN to recognize and admit Kosovo as a sovereign state.

The only idea most Serbian leaders agree on is that Kosovo must always be part of Serbia. Not a single Serbian leader has dared to state the simple truth that Kosovo is lost. Much of Serbia's population buys into its leaders' delusion, but truth be told, most Serbs don't really care all that much about Kosovo, and few have their bags packed to move there. They are far more concerned with their country's anemic economy and disastrously high unemployment rate (19 percent last year) and its continuing political and economic isolation from the world.

It is no accident that President Tadic agreed to talks with Kosovo not only after much hard lobbying by EU members and the dangled prospect of accelerated EU membership, but after a visit by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton shortly before the Serb's announcement (and one by Vice President Joseph Biden in 2009). While the Europeans are taking the leading role as mediators, the United States long enjoyed the most trust among the Balkan countries. The Clinton and Biden visits have gone a long way toward convincing the Serbs that the United States now really does have their interests in mind as much as those of their neighbors.

Anybody who has been involved in Balkan affairs for any length of time learns to guard against excessive opti-

mism, but these are hopeful signs. Two things must happen for further progress to occur in the Balkans. Serbia must make its way toward membership in the EU, which will not only give it an enormous economic boost but help to weave the Serbs into a web of relationships with the rest of Europe, particularly with other regional powers such as Bulgaria and Romania. But no progress on that front is possible as long as Serbia refuses to deliver its two remaining fugitives to the war crimes tribunal in The Hague, General Ratko Mladic, the notorious

wartime leader of the ethnic Serbs in Bosnia, and Goran Hadzic, a leader of the Croatian Serbs. (Hadzic's whereabouts are uncertain, but even though the Serbian government has offered a large reward and made other gestures toward Mladic's apprehension, there is not much doubt that he continues to enjoy the protection of key members of the Serbian army's general staff and intelligence services.) Serbia will get nowhere until the status of the two fugitives is resolved.

There is very little in the history of the Balkans to suggest that Serbia and its neighbors will find their way to a peaceful future without outside help. Despite the protracted, difficult, and often frustrating nature of their efforts to build peace and nations in the Balkans, it is essential that the United States and its European allies maintain their stabilizing presence in Bosnia and Kosovo, with the EU taking the lead in negotiations and nudging Serbia toward a more moderate stance.

In the end, Serbia and Kosovo are probably best rid of each other. There is little prospect that Serbia will formally recognize Kosovo's existence, but the two neighbors must establish at least a modicum of everyday cooperation. They will be living next to each other for a long, long time. There is conflict in their past, but also amity and a complex web of economic and social ties. If they can find a way to live together in peace, the people of the Balkans may finally leave rock bottom behind. ■