

Biden in the Balkans: US asserts interests in shattered region

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This week, US Vice President Joseph Biden is visiting the Balkans. It is the first time a US vice president had been to the region since 1983. Starting on Tuesday and ending on Thursday, Biden will visit Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. US Ambassador to Serbia Cameron Munter said that his visit was evidence of a “deeper interest” on the part of the new US administration.

Biden is in the Balkans to halt a crisis that threatens US interests and prestige in the region. He will reaffirm support for Kosovan independence declared in February 2008 and press Serbia to stop undermining it by encouraging non-cooperation by the Serb minority. He will also address Bosnian leaders about the political impasse that has developed in the country.

Biden’s visit follows an outburst by Deputy Assistant to the US Secretary of State for European Affairs Stuart Jones directed at the European Union (EU) during a press conference in Brussels last week. Jones declared that, “Americans are not satisfied with the Brussels leadership in the Balkans” and criticized a number of European countries that are calling for a delay in the accession of more Balkan states to the EU and NATO.

Foreign Policy magazine reported, “Sadly, Biden’s visit to Serbia, Kosovo, and, most especially, Bosnia, is all too necessary. The reason is simple: Europe is still not up to resolving its own security problems. Brussels is indifferent at best, and divided at worst, when it comes to the pressing issues in the Balkans. Five EU states still do not recognize Kosovo. The European Union lacks a viable policy toward Bosnia, leaving Washington to lobby most consistently for the steps that would bring the country into the EU.”

On the same day that Jones made his statement, the US Congress passed a resolution on Bosnia, calling for resolution of the constitutional crisis in the country, which has been divided into the Serbian dominated Republika Srpska (RS) and the Muslim-Croat Federation since the 1995 US brokered Dayton peace agreement. It declared that “the full incorporation of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the Euro-Atlantic community is in the national interest of the United States and important for the stabilisation of south-eastern Europe.”

Congress’ resolution also called for the appointment of a new US special envoy to the Balkans region, stating, “The United States should appoint a special envoy to the Balkans who can work in partnership with the EU and political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina to facilitate reforms at all levels of government and society, while also assisting the political development of other countries in the region.” The new appointment is said to have shocked EU officials, who pointed out that the only other places where such envoys exist are in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US Congress also demanded the Office of the High Representative (OHR)—created by the Dayton peace agreement as a pro-consular official with ultimate authority in Bosnia—to be kept open and not closed as planned at the end of June. It also called on the EU to reconsider its plans to pull out the European peacekeeping force, EUFOR, which replaced the NATO-led one in December 2004.

In the weeks leading up to the resolution, Richard Holbrooke, the chief architect of the Dayton agreement and Paddy Ashdown, the high representative from 2002 to 2006, made direct appeals to the US Congress. Ashdown branded the country, “Divided, dysfunctional, a black hole, corruption heavily embedded, a space that we cannot afford to leave because it’s too destabilizing if we do, but we cannot push forward toward full statehood, either.” He called on the US to use its influence to “support and strengthen” the EU, which he said suffered from “a lack of purpose” in the Balkans.

The US moves are acutely embarrassing for the EU. The Balkans region was meant to be the arena in which the EU would flex its muscles for the first time following the launch of the Common Security and Defence Policy some 10 years ago. The EU’s main strategy in the region has been to offer the prospect of EU membership, but this approach has shattered.

Several EU member states are opposed to further enlargement of the bloc until fundamental “reforms” are carried out, in particular ratification and implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel both “rule out enlargement without Lisbon.”

The global recession has intensified the economic disaster in the already impoverished region leading to increasing numbers of people questioning the advantages of EU membership. A Gallup poll conducted last year found that less than half of Bosnians are enthusiastic about joining the EU.

Finally, the EU confronts a region divided into ethnically based regimes dominated by nationalists for which it has a major responsibility. The major imperialist powers, particularly the US and Germany, deliberately engineered Yugoslavia’s break-up, with a complete indifference to the inevitable tragic consequences of their intervention. It was inevitable, given the history and politics of Yugoslavia, that the piecemeal break-up of the federation would lead to civil war and create new ethnically based states incapable of providing a progressive solution to the problems facing the Balkan people—entrenched poverty, unemployment, crime and corruption.

Recently, a report, *Bosnia’s Incomplete Transition: Between Dayton and Europe*, published by the International Crisis Group (ICG), which numbers former presidents, ministers and businessmen amongst its members warned that the Dayton agreement “is arguably under the greatest threat since the war ended in 1995.”

The ICG complained that “international credibility took a big hit” in 2007 when the EU went ahead and signed a stabilisation and association agreement with Bosnia—a major step towards the country’s EU membership—even though key criteria, such as reform of the police force, had not been met.

The organisation also criticised moves to shut down the OHR and transfer some of its powers to an EU special representative despite three of the seven criteria, such as full compliance with the Dayton agreement, remaining unfulfilled. Such a decision would end up

“crippling the EU’s ability to apply firm policies toward Bosnia long after the protectorate itself has ended...weaken EU credibility throughout the region, notably in Kosovo” and signal “another international community retreat.”

The ICG ignores the responsibility of the Western powers for any role in the disaster and heaps the blames entirely on two of the country’s main nationalist leaders. One time “darling” of the West, because of his opposition to Milosevic’s Socialist Party, Milorad Dodik, the RS prime minister and leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats, calls for the OHR to close immediately and regularly demands the right to self-determination. After Kosovo declared its independence in February 2008, the RS National Assembly proclaimed, “it has the right to determine a position on its legal status through...a referendum” and following the recent US Congress resolution it demanded High Representative Valentin Inzko stop using his powers to impose laws and remove politicians and reverse decisions made by his predecessors.

Haris Silajdzic, the Bosnian Muslim member of the state presidency and head of the Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina, wants the OHR to continue and demands the abolition of Republika Srpska. Most Bosnian leaders want a centralised Bosnian state and see the current federal set-up as “a temporary system, hardly worthy of their attention.” Some warn of war if RS attempts to secede.

Even the leadership of Bosnia’s smallest ethnic group, the Croats, remains committed to autonomy and demands separate institutions, such as a Croatian television channel. Because the vast majority of Bosnian Croats have dual citizenship with Croatia and hold Croatian passports they are allowed visa-free travel to the EU unlike the Bosnians and Serbs. Many have settled in Croatia where the average income, about \$10,500, is almost three times as high as in Bosnia. The Croat population is estimated to have fallen far below the 1991 level of just over 17 per cent.

According to the ICG, Bosnia “faces the global economic downturn with no demonstrated ability to respond effectively.” Reports suggest remittances from relatives working abroad are falling drastically, export markets are beginning to dry up, and the real estate market is on the verge of collapse. House prices fell by up to 40 percent by January 2009, and the number of transactions fell by half in the last quarter of 2008. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development estimates that Bosnia will be “the hardest hit” in the region, with growth declining from an annual 4.5 percent to 1.5 percent. Bosnia’s 40 percent unemployment rate is sure to rise as a result.

The failure of the Western powers and the nationalist politicians in Bosnia has led to a collapse in support for the country’s political institutions. A recent poll showed Bosnia “outperforms all other [World Values Survey] transformation countries” in showing “no interest at all” in politics. Most young people are “outside the political process,” and nearly 80 percent of all Bosnians feel that none of the political parties represent their interest. According to philosophy professor at Banja Luka University, Mirograd Zivanovic, “After each election the glue holding our state together is disappearing. I don’t think we are threatened with just collapse. Something much more grave is happening, the death [of the country].”

In neighbouring Kosovo, public protests and violent incidents broke out earlier this month, first by Serbs in Mitrovica against the rebuilding of Albanian houses destroyed in the Kosovo war, and then over the refusal by Serbs in northern Kosovo to pay for electricity provided by the Kosovo-run power company KEK. They are signs of continuing ethnic divisions that have

split the newly independent country into a majority ethnic Albanian region and a Serb enclave in the north bordering Serbia. Oliver Ivanovic, state secretary of Serbia's Ministry for Kosovo, responded to these developments saying that attempts by the Kosovo Albanian government or the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) to "establish full control over northern Kosovo would cause bloodshed," adding that "large scale unrest would break out."

The occurrence of such incidents is also being blamed on the EU's handling of the issue of Kosovan independence from Serbia. Following its declaration in February 2008, EU Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn boasted, "I'm proud that by pledging 500 million euros—that is, half a billion euros—the European Union today clearly demonstrates that this sentence, 'Kosovo is a European matter, a profoundly European matter,' is not only a diplomatic formula but most concrete, tangible proof of our commitment to Kosovo."

But over one year later, five of the 27 EU member states, fearing that separatist movements in their own countries would be encouraged by the Kosovo example, have still to formally recognize the new country's independence.

There has also been criticism of the EU's stabilisation and association agreement with Serbia in April 2008, which opened up the prospect of EU membership even though Belgrade strongly opposed EU policies in Kosovo, especially the deployment of EULEX, and refused to cooperate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Serbia, supported by Russia, has refused to accept Kosovan independence referring the case to the International Court of Justice. Serb nationalists argue that Kosovan independence justifies Republika Srpska breaking away from Bosnia and the Serb dominated areas from Kosovo.

Behind the simmering ethnic tensions in Kosovo lie the economic problems. The country remains one of Europe's poorest, with unemployment levels estimated as high as 70 percent. The EU has been seriously implicated in Kosovos' endemic crime and corruption. Funds for "economic reconstruction" to help rebuild Kosovo after the war 10 years ago were involved in 12 cases of alleged criminal activity and 27 examples of alleged breaches of rules on the awarding of contracts. The EU and United Nations have abandoned investigations into serious fraud and corruption allegations involving €80 million worth of funding for Pristina airport and the KEK electricity company. The response of the EU to these scandals is to press for the privatisation of the airport, KEK and other key state-owned companies but this will only to further social inequality and domination by international capital.

The "re-engagement" of the US in the Balkans is a bitter indictment of the western powers' record of intervention. Poverty, corruption and ethnic separation have become endemic in the Balkan region as a result of the attempt to dismantle the former Yugoslavia. That intervention was carried out under the cloak of humanitarianism, but signaled the legitimisation of the naked use of overwhelming military power against small countries in pursuit of strategic "Big Power" interests, the cynical violation of the principle of national sovereignty, the de facto reestablishment of colonialist forms of subjugation, and the revival of inter-imperialist antagonisms. The inability of the EU, the US and various ethnically-based governments to solve the social disaster in the Balkans can only be resolved by the building of an internationalist party based on the perspective of the United Socialist States of the Balkans.

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