

First Shots Fired in Diplomatic “Battle for Kosovo”

Plans to turn Kosovo into a Colony

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A new “Battle of Kosovo” is fast approaching and the first shots have already been fired.

This stage of the struggle will be between diplomats. But, to quote Slobodan Milosevic, Serbia’s former leader in his famous speech at Gazimestan in Kosovo in June 1989, “They are not armed battles, though such things should not be excluded yet.”

What the public knows is this: the 14-month negotiation process in Vienna about the future status of Kosovo is over. In the next few weeks, Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish president charged by the UN with overseeing this will make final adjustments to his plan, which he will then present to Ban Ki-Moon, the UN Secretary General. He will then give it to the Security Council.

As is already known, the Ahtisaari plan foresees an independent Kosovo, albeit one subjected to various conditions and with a high level of autonomy granted to the Serbian minority. Serbia has rejected the plan outright while Kosovo’s Albanian leaders have accepted it.

The plan also foresees that the UN mission in Kosovo should be wound up and replaced by a large EU mission dealing with police and justice and a smaller one, headed by a so-called International Civilian Representative, who will have significant powers to intervene in Kosovo’s political life. This position is modeled on that of the High Representative in Bosnia.

Everyone agrees that because Kosovo’s international legal status is governed by the UN Security Council resolution that ended the war in Kosovo in 1999, a new resolution is needed to terminate the UN’s mandate there and transfer powers to the Civilian Representative.

It is at this point that there is no agreement on how to proceed.

Until recently, western diplomats had been expecting that Russia would sooner or later give its assent to Kosovo’s independence and thus help usher in a new stage in its history by either supporting, or at least not opposing, a new UN Security Council resolution.

However, far from agreeing to do this, Russian diplomats have been repeating of late that they will not support anything that Serbs and Albanians have not mutually agreed. Since Serbs and Albanians cannot agree on the territory’s final status, this amounts to threatening an effective veto.

What is unknown is whether the Russians mean what they say, or whether they are

ratcheting up the tension as part of an eventual bargaining process by which they will extract concessions from the US elsewhere.

For this reason, several things are now happening, some in public and some in private. Behind the scenes, Ahtisaari and other western diplomats have been arguing that Kosovo is about to pose a major test for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP, which was badly damaged earlier by Iraq. Hence unity is seen as essential.

Their argument runs that the EU is preparing to make a huge political and diplomatic investment in Kosovo but that without unity within the EU and across the Atlantic, Russia will drive a wedge through the CFSP and chaos could result.

For this reason, EU "stragglers" on Kosovo are now being rounded up and herded into line. Countries that have voiced scepticism on Kosovo's independence, or which see it posing unwelcome ramifications for their own countries, are being cajoled into line by countries like Britain that actively support the Ahtisaari plan.

Spain, for example, which has separatist problems of its own, has now been encouraged to see EU unity as more important than its own doubts about Kosovo's independence. Slovakia and Romania are similarly likely to fall into line.

Diplomats say the chances of securing a UN resolution in favour of the Ahtisaari plan are far greater if the EU and the US confront Russia together over the issue.

The first salvoes in this tussle have been fired. On March 13, Richard Holbrooke, the US diplomat who secured the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the Bosnian war in 1995, published an opinion piece about Kosovo in the Washington Post.

Holbrooke is now a private citizen but is also known to be close to the US State Department, so his words carry great weight.

He argues that a Russian attempt to veto, water down or delay the Ahtisaari plan would mean that "the fragile peace in Kosovo will evaporate within days, and a new wave of violence – possibly even a new war – will erupt".

He added, "If Russia blocks the Ahtisaari plan, the chaos that follows will be Moscow's responsibility and will affect other aspects of Russia's relationship with the West."

Most significantly, Holbrooke says that if a Security Council resolution on Kosovo fails because of Russia, Kosovo Albanians will declare independence unilaterally and that the US and many Muslim states would probably recognise the new state, although most EU countries would not.

"European security and stability and Russia's relationship with the West – are on the line," he said.

Diplomats continue to insist that there is no Plan B if the Ahtisaari plan fails. There is, they say, only a plan for "controlled" independence. The alternative is "uncontrolled" independence because without a resolution, there will be no EU mission or Civilian Representative.

Behind the scenes, some diplomats and others have already begun to mull over what may

happen if Plan A fails. However, no one wants to talk about this in public. Nobody – yet – wants to contemplate disaster in Kosovo.

If Holbrooke's article is an opening salvo in a diplomatic war, we can expect more diplomatic shelling. At the same time, there are also likely to be discrete back-channel talks that most of us will never get to hear about, at least until the history books are written.

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