

Kosovo countdown

Lessons for Sri Lanka

By [Dayan Jayatileka](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

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Kosovo is set to declare its independence from Serbia this Sunday. In his four hour long valedictory media conference, outgoing Russian President Vladimir Putin has denounced the move as “illegal and immoral”. Serbia and Russia have called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council. Russia, China, India and South Africa are among the countries which have opposed Kosovo’s declaration of independence. The open secession of Kosovo and its imminent recognition by powerful Western states takes place notwithstanding UN Resolution 1244 of 1999 which recognises Kosovo as part of Serbia. As the Russian Federation’s charismatic Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (who stunned me by a burst of fluent Sinhala upon introduction) warned in his Gunnar Myrdal Lecture in Geneva a few days back, the recognition of Kosovo’s independence runs contrary to the very basis of international law and is fraught with consequences for Europe and other parts of the world.

“The Kosovo crisis sheds light on a dynamic in world politics which is of central importance to Sri Lanka. This is the matter of state sovereignty. As a country which is grappling with a challenge to its territorial integrity and unity, all tendencies towards the break-up of established states are against the basic interests of Sri Lanka.”

The Russian position has consistently been that any solution should be agreed upon in negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo. This was abandoned as impossible by Marti Ahtissari, who recommended de facto independence for Kosovo. Incidentally he was brought to Sri Lanka as a possible negotiator or facilitator by the Ethnic Affairs Advisor of President Kumaratunga, but luckily for Sri Lanka was objected to by Lakshman Kadirgamar and, it must be admitted, the JVP.

There were options other than secession for Kosovo. One was for the fullest autonomy within Serbia. The other was the carving out of the Serbian majority portion of Kosovo and

its annexation with Serbia. However, all options were aborted by the obduracy of the Kosovo leadership, which insists on independence. It must be noted that the current leader of Kosovo is a former leader of the separatist army which practised terrorism, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The majority of people of Kosovo had become accustomed to the idea of independence during the several years of administration by a UN High Commissioner (later nominated as an IIGEP member for Sri Lanka by the EU).

The hardening of the position of Kosovo was also due to open pledges of recognition of independence by several key Western powers.

Of course the breakaway of Kosovo merely completes the unravelling of the former Yugoslavia. There were many reasons for this: the abandonment by majority Serbian ultra-nationalists, in the new context of electoral competition, of the enlightened compact forged by the unorthodox Communist Joseph Broz Tito, a founder leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (and friend of Sri Lanka); the exacerbation of ethnic tensions by the adoption of an IMF package; the rollback by Serb nationalism of Kosovo's autonomous status as a province; recognition by certain Western European states of the breakaway Yugoslav republics setting off a centrifugal chain reaction; the excessive brutality against civilians of the Serbian army and Serb militia in the breakaway republics; the partiality of the Western media which focussed only on Serb excesses but not those committed by anti-Serb forces.

In the final instance however, the secession of Kosovo is traceable to a single mistake: the decision by President Milosevic to follow the advice of President Yeltsin (who had already been lobbied by the US), and withdraw the Yugoslav army from Kosovo, notwithstanding the fact that in its heavily camouflaged and dug-in positions, it had withstood US/NATO bombing and was well positioned to inflict, with its tradition and training in partisan warfare, unacceptable casualties on any invading ground forces. Cuban leader Fidel Castro reveals that at this crucial moment he had written to Milosevic and urged him, in the final words of his missive, to "Resist! Resist! Resist!", but the Belgrade leadership failed to do so. In short, the impending independence of Kosovo is the result of the failure of political will on the part of the ex-Yugoslav leadership. Instead of resisting, the Yugoslav army withdrew and was replaced by an international presence on the ground in Kosovo. After a period of tutelage, Kosovo was encouraged with a nod and a wink, to secede completely.

These then are the lessons for Sri Lanka: never withdraw the armed forces from any part of our territory in which they are challenged, and never permit a foreign presence on our soil. After 450 years of colonial presence, and especially after the experience of the Kandyan Convention, we Sri Lankans should have these lessons engraved in our historical memory and our collective identity. The Western imperialists who failed to capture our island militarily were able to take control of it only because we double crossed our leader, trusted the West, signed an agreement and allowed the foreign presence into our heartland.

The Western war against Yugoslavia was waged not by the Bush administration but by a liberal one. It was waged under the doctrine of liberal internationalism, and humanitarian interventionism. These doctrines were updated to "preventive humanitarian interventionism" in the case of the invasion of Iraq. Today, the buzzword is the "Responsibility to Protect", and I refer not to the UN World Leaders summit of 2005 which requires the endorsement of the Security Council, but the original 1998 version of the Canadian government sponsored International Commission on State Sovereignty, which had a far more elastic interpretation! The co-chairman of that Commission was former Australian

Foreign Minister Gareth Evans (whom Lakshman Kadirgamar was determined, should not play a role in Lanka's peace process despite his offers to do so in 1995).

We may find a newer version arising with UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband's Aung San Suu Kyi lecture delivered at Oxford University a few days back. In it, he says that notwithstanding some mistakes in Iraq and Afghanistan, the West must not forget, and must take up once again, its moral imperative to expand democracy throughout the world (including, interestingly enough in "established democracies"). He identifies and rejects three objections to that project: the "Asian values" school which in its 1993 variant of a statement by 34 countries, recognises democracy but resist the imposition of western values as neo-colonial; the Realpolitik school which stresses "interests" rather than values and morality; and even the pragmatic school which points out that democracy is the product of internal historical processes. Foreign Secretary Miliband makes several pointedly critical references to China, (which he will be visiting shortly) in his speech on the need of the West to extend democracy worldwide.

The patterns of world politics appear kaleidoscopic, with coalitions forming over one issue, only to break up over another. At first glance this would make long term alliances or affiliations almost impossible. However, certain issues are revelatory of underlying dynamics which are of a defining character. Kosovo is certainly one such issue.

The Kosovo crisis sheds light on a dynamic in world politics which is of central importance to Sri Lanka. This is the matter of state sovereignty. As a country which is grappling with a challenge to its territorial integrity and unity, all tendencies towards the break-up of established states are against the basic interests of Sri Lanka.

The issue of Kosovo not only illustrates the phenomenon of secessionism. It reveals a more fundamental contradiction within world politics, namely that between state sovereignty on the one hand and those tendencies which act to undermine states. Such tendencies are twofold: secessionism from within and hegemonism from without. The tendency towards hegemonism manifests itself most starkly in the phenomenon of interventionism.

Kosovo and earlier Chechnya disprove the identification that some make between Western interventionism and particular religions. While it is true that on a global scale, the West perceives itself as besieged by and struggling against what it calls Islamist terrorism or Islamic radicalism/extremism (some hard-line ideologues even talk of Islamo-fascism) attention must be drawn to the fact that Serbs are Christian, while Kosovo Albanians are Islamic. The Chechen separatists, some of whom were headquartered in the West, were also Islamic, while Russia is mainly Christian. Western interventionism is not tied to any particular ethnic or religious group. The name of the game seems the old one of divide and rule, and whichever group or struggle weakens the target state appears to be the one that is afforded patronage.

All tendencies in world politics which weaken, fragment and destabilise states, undermining their sovereignty and making them vulnerable to hegemony and intervention, are inimical to Sri Lanka. All tendencies which strengthen and defend state sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, are friendly and helpful towards Sri Lanka. By extension, all state and non-state actors which work towards the weakening of state sovereignty in the non metropolitan areas of the world, i.e. the global South and East, cannot be regarded as the strategic friends, allies and partners of Sri Lanka. All state and non-state actors which support, defend and work towards the preservation and strengthening of the sovereignty,

independence, unity and territorial integrity of states, are objectively the friends, allies and partners of Sri Lanka.

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