

The U.S. Role in Southeast Europe:

In and after the Peace Plans

Matthew Rhodes⁵⁴

I. Introduction

More than any other region, over the past fifteen years Southeast Europe has both reflected and impacted the broader state of transatlantic, and in particular United States-European Union, relations. During this period, the level of U.S. focus and engagement in region has waxed and waned. Strong American focus and leadership have alternated with disengagement and deference to EU initiatives according to a four- to five-year cycle. Without fully reversing the current decade's dynamic of "Europeanization", the past year has seen a resurgence of U.S. activism. The extent and duration of this latest pendulum swing will depend on developments both inside and outside the region.

II. The Hour of Europe

During the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, U.S. policy was initially stand-offish. For the presidential administration of the senior George Bush, the country's first steps toward dissolution were overshadowed by concurrent events such as German unification and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Moreover, fear of the force of precedent on the simultaneously unraveling, nuclear-armed Soviet Union reinforced the administration's desire for Yugoslavia's preservation as a whole. After a last-minute trip failed to dissuade Croat and Slovenian leaders from declaring independence, then-Secretary of State James Baker famously announced the U.S. had "no dog" in the ensuing fights with ethnic Serbs and the rump Yugoslav army. U.S. reaction was largely limited to assent to a UN arms embargo and humanitarian peace mission.

⁵⁴ The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Despite having criticized this hand-off approach during the 1992 election campaign, Bush's successor Bill Clinton largely continued the same track at the outset of his term. New Secretary of State Warren Christopher used his first meetings with counterparts in Europe in May 1993 as an opportunity to take in allied viewpoints rather than press for new direction. The modest outcome was designation of several Bosnian cities as "safe havens" that could be defended by NATO airpower.⁵⁵

Several factors inhibited a more forceful response. The new administration lacked experience in international affairs, and its priority focus was on the economy and other domestic issues. It also faced serious scepticism of direct intervention from within the American military, including the respected Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell. The deaths of eighteen Army rangers in a failed attempt to capture warlord Mohammed Adid in Mogadishu, Somalia in October 2003 reinforced the reluctance to commit troops to international missions elsewhere.

Officials from the European Community initially welcomed the opening for leadership in the Balkans. The end of the Cold War had reduced their dependence on U.S. security guarantees, and preparations for the February 1992 Maastricht treaty that would formally add common foreign and security policy as a new "pillar" of European Union were well underway. In the words of Luxembourg's Foreign Minister Jacques Poos, this was to be "the hour of Europe."

Unlike the Americans, several European powers contributed ground troops to the first UN peace operations, giving them a more immediate stake in subsequent policy. European countries, led by Germany, were also the first to recognize the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, and later also Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1993-94, the joint EU-UN Vance-Owen plan for cantonization became the leading international proposal for Bosnia-Herzegovina, where fighting remained most intense.

⁵⁵ See Whitney, Craig. "NATO's Leadership Gap: Washington's Seeming Confusion on Bosnia Throws Alliance into Crisis of Relevance." *New York Times* 29 May 1993.

III. America Acts

However, their own European efforts proved unable to stop the worsening violence. One significant problem was a lack of internal unity as to how best to proceed, including among leading members Britain, France, and Germany. A second shortcoming was the practical and political limitations on the military capabilities that could be deployed to the region.

The deepening humanitarian tragedy and the threat it posed to the credibility of NATO, America's most important military alliance, eventually pushed the Clinton administration into more decisive action. First, it brokered the 1994 Washington Treaty ending hostilities between ethnic Croats and Bosniak Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the summer of the following year, 1995, it tacitly accepted Croatia's military recapture of areas that had been held by ethnic Serb forces. More dramatically, after the fall of the declared safe haven Srebrenica and an unusually deadly mortar strike on a Sarajevo marketplace, it proceeded to lead Operation Deliberate Force, NATO's first sustained series of airstrikes against Bosnian Serb targets.

These steps set the stage for the Dayton Accords, negotiated at a U.S. Air Force base in Ohio. The agreement established a weak federal constitutional structure for Bosnia-Herzegovina and transferred international security responsibilities there from the United Nations to a more robust NATO force. Significantly, U.S. troops accounted for a third of the initial 60,000 soldiers deployed.

Italy and other European countries carried out the more limited Operation Alba in response to a breakdown of order in Albania in 1997, but the U.S. lead was again evident during the Kosovo crisis at the end of the decade. In the fall of 1998, Richard Holbrooke, the lead U.S. negotiator at the Dayton talks, reached an agreement with the Milosevic government in Belgrade for unarmed observers from the OSCE to monitor conditions in the predominantly ethnically Albanian province of Serbia. In early 1999 a resurgence of violence and the Yugoslav parliament's rejection of the subsequent Rambouillet Accords led to

NATO's Operation Allied Force against rump Yugoslavia. During the 78-day bombing campaign, American pilots flew approximately 85% of the alliance's combat missions, even as U.S. commanders complained of excessive strictures from European allies. Small American task forces also deployed to Albania and Macedonia. Finally, as in Bosnia, Americans constituted the largest initial segment of the follow-on peacekeeping force, here making up a fifth of the 40,000 troops within NATO's KFOR (Kosovo Force).

IV. Europeanization

Allied Force would prove the high water mark of U.S. focus on Southeast Europe. The beginning years of the twenty-first century witnessed a reversion to Europeanization in the region. In the U.S., the presidential administration of the junior George Bush entered office in January 2001 famously sceptical of Balkan-style "nation-building" as an appropriate military mission. The 9/11 terrorist attacks accelerated its shift of focus elsewhere, to countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Meanwhile, the European Union's own progress in developing a European Security and Defense Policy after the French-British St. Malo summit of 1998 enhanced EU capacity for independent action. At the same time, the situation on the ground shifted from active armed conflict, in which U.S. "hard power" had been indispensable, to civilian institution building and economic development, in which EU "soft power" held the comparative advantage.⁵⁶

A mixed, transitional case in this process was the response to violence between government security forces and armed ethnic Albanians in northwestern Macedonia in spring 2001. The fighting did prompt new U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to assure all parties of continuing American involvement; just as the U.S. and Europe had gone into the

⁵⁶ Along with the general enlargement process, a special example of an EU-sponsored soft power instrument has been the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe.

Balkans “together,” they would also go “out together.”⁵⁷ U.S. diplomat James Pardew and French EU envoy Francois Leotard acted as co-mediators and -signatories of the Ohrid peace agreement that summer.

NATO supplied the first international forces to supervise and assure the return to peaceful stability, but with the American role largely limited to providing air transportation and other logistical support. The modest, 30-day disarmament mission Essential Harvest was followed by Operations Amber Fox and Allied Harmony to provide security for OSCE and EU observers. In early 2003, these were succeeded by the EU Operation Concordia, the first true ESDP mission conducted with use of NATO assets under the Berlin Plus arrangements. In late 2003 this in turn gave way to the EU police mission Proxima.

EU primacy was more immediately evident in the effort to avoid an early split between the remaining Yugoslav republics, Serbia and Montenegro. Fearing the impact on the still raw situation in Kosovo, in late 2002 EU officials brokered the Belgrade Agreement for a recast, highly decentralized “state union”. The driving force of the EU behind this creation led critics to dub it “Solania” after High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana.

Finally, the strong EU role in reconstruction and other post-conflict issues in Bosnia-Herzegovina became symbolized by the Office of the High Representative. That position has been charged with representing and coordinating the work of the major international bodies in the country since Dayton and was formally double-hatted as EU Special Representative in early 2002. The Office carries expansive authority known as “Bonn powers” to void legislation and remove local politicians and officials deemed obstructive. These so-called were used especially actively during the tenure of Paddy Ashdown 2002-2005.

⁵⁷ For an early use of this oft-repeated formulation, see Powell’s remarks to journalists after the meeting of the Balkan Contact Group April 12, 1991; <http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/apr01/hed3063.shtml>.

European countries had also supplied a steadily increasing proportion of the declining overall number of troops in NATO's SFOR (Stabilization Force) in the country. In December 2004 the EU's 7000-troop Operation Althea took the next step and assumed SFOR's former responsibilities for preserving military security. A residual NATO contingent, including 250 U.S. troops, remains in place to assist with defense reform, apprehension of indicted war criminals, and other matters.

V. The Year of Decision and Beyond

Without displacing the European Union, from 2005 the Bush administration has used its second term to reenergize US involvement in Southeast Europe. Both dissatisfaction with the status quo (most acutely in Kosovo after the violence of March 2004) and a perceived opportunity to overcome lingering ill will over intervention in Iraq via practical cooperation with European allies have drawn the U.S. into re-elevating its profile in the region. So too has the general loss of momentum behind Europeanization after the failed referenda on the constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands in late spring 2005, the tortured delay in the medium-term budget framework, and the mixed progress on reforms by the Union's expected next members Bulgaria and Romania.

Of further significance has been a relative shift in emphasis in the U.S. approach to the War on Terror. Following the still ongoing, large-scale "kinetic" military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, more sustained attention is being focused on what is referred to as "countering ideological support for terrorism". As articulated in President Bush's second inaugural address of January 2005 and more fully in the administration's updated national security strategy of March 2006, there is increased priority on "transformational diplomacy" to assist partner states' development as "effective democracies" characterized by the rule-of-law, respect for human rights, and popular accountability.⁵⁸ Success in this regard is intended both to build up the capacity of states

⁵⁸ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, pp.4-5 and 33-34.

directly involved as reliable partners in advancing international security as well as to present broader models of success and opportunity as antidotes to violent extremism.

Southeast Europe presents an important region for pursuit of this policy. First, it is an area where corruption and transnational crime are perceived as among the chief challenges not only to internal political and economic development but also to realistic prospects for further integration into Euroatlantic institutions. Thus, a significant portion of the political and social elite is open to working with outside partners in pursuing reforms to strengthen democratic governance. Expressed another way, the countries of the region may be just fragile enough to call for external assistance but still promising enough in terms of their prospects for success to make external partners willing to make the investment of time and resources.

Second, Southeast European countries hold the prospect of offering especially powerful models if successful. Visible results in overcoming the region's fresh experience with authoritarian rule and violent conflict would show progress is possible even in difficult settings. Likewise, the presence of persistent ethnic and sectarian diversity, and in particular of substantial Muslim populations, means peaceful management of differences could provide an examples of tolerance and coexistence for other regions and reinforce the argument that the War on Terror is neither a Huntingtonian "clash of civilizations" nor Western crusade against Islam.

A. Status Issues

2006 has been dubbed "the year of decision" in Southeast Europe because of the number of major steps expected in fundamental constitutional or integration issues for countries there. Accordingly, one significant area in which the United States has re-engaged has been in the series of political status talks in Yugoslav successor states. America's involvement has been greatest where the most potential for renewed violence exists and/or where its role in crafting existing arrangements was most significant.

The U.S. exercised the least involvement in regard to Montenegro's independence referendum, where the EU role remained decisive. Solana-appointed Miroslav Lajčak and other EU representatives worked directly with both the pro-independence Montenegrin government and pro-unionist political forces in setting the conditions for the May 21 vote. In the end, the EU's insistence on both a minimum 50% turnout and supermajority of 55% of the votes cast being for independence was met easily in the first case (86%) but extremely narrowly in the second (55.4%).

The U.S. took a more active lead in the less widely reported attempt to overhaul the Bosnia-Herzegovina's constitutional structures from Dayton. The supporting role of the High Representative/EU Special Representative here reflected the more restrained personality of Christoph Schwarz-Schilling, the former German parliamentarian and minister who succeeded Paddy Ashdown in the post in December 2005, as well as the spreading impression that excessive activism by the Representative had begun to retard local political development.⁵⁹

Building on the success of unifying armed forces in the 2005 defense reform, a process NATO and the United States were also deeply involved, U.S. diplomats led by Donald Hays, a former deputy High Representative, and Ambassador Douglas McElhane spent months urging political leaders from all three major ethnic communities to agree to amendments to strengthen the central government and streamline the presidency and parliament. The American role was highlighted by the commitment in principle signed by nine officials and party leaders after a meeting with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Washington, DC in November 2005 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Dayton Accords. However, despite continued lobbying by the U.S. embassy, in late April 2006 the package of reforms fell just shy of the needed two-thirds majority in the Bosnian parliament. This setback meant the hoped-for changes would not be made before parliamentary

⁵⁹ See International Commission on the Balkans, "The Balkans in Europe's Future," April 2005, pp.23-25; <http://balkan-commission.org/activities/Report.pdf>.

elections in October, but the U.S. is expected to revive the effort afterward.⁶⁰

Finally, the U.S. occupies a central role in regards to the future status talks on Kosovo being held under the auspices of the United Nations. Already in late 2005 the U.S. worked with the other members of the Contact Group (Russia, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy) to develop a set of parameters for the talks.

Approximately 1800 American troops continue to serve as part of NATO's KFOR mission. Representatives of the Kosovar Albanian majority in particular continue to view U.S. military power and presence as key not only in assuring their group's survival in the province in the late 1990s but also its security into the future. This appreciation gives the U.S. a certain level of trust as well as leverage if needed to push for compromises or concessions in regards to decentralization, minority rights, protection of cultural and religious sites, and other issues of particular concern for Belgrade and the 100,000 or so ethnic Serbs still living in the province.

At the same time, the U.S. will continue to work with other countries to shape the terms of a prospective settlement, possibly also in the event the Serbian government and Kosovar representatives prove unable to reach a mutually acceptable resolution. One potential task for the U.S. is to dissuade other permanent members such as Russia or China from vetoing a settlement consistent with the Contact Group principles. Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica has appealed to Russia in particular to uphold Serb interests, but that country's assent to the Contact Group list suggests this may not extend to seeking to block outright the type of conditional, transitional independence for Kosovo identified by many observers as the most likely outcome. Second, if

⁶⁰ See Hitchner, R. Bruce. "From Dayton to Brussels: The Story Behind the Constitutional and Governmental Reform Process in Bosnia and Herzegovina." *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 30:1, Winter 2006, pp.125-135; also Mirna Skrbic, Mirna, and T.K. Vogel, "Bosnia: Constitutional Reform Falter". *Transitions Online* 27 April 2006.

some version of independence is indeed put forward, the U.S. may have to work even harder to delimit such a decision's force as precedent. Among others, Russian President Vladimir Putin has suggested recognition of independence for Kosovo would open the way for the same for declared separatist states such as Transdnistria in Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia.

B. NATO Initiatives

Beyond specific status issues, as a leading member of NATO the U.S. has recently been working on significant new steps to intensify alliance relations within the region. One ongoing aspect has been advancing the full practical integration into NATO structures and processes of countries such as Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania that were part of the "Big Bang" enlargement in 2004. This includes those countries' involvement in debate on NATO's further evolution at the "transformation summit" in Riga in October 2006. Next, the United States is helping to prepare for the possible extension of NATO's Partnership for Peace program to previously excluded countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, newly independent Montenegro, and/or Serbia by late 2006 or early 2007, pending certification of those countries' full cooperation on war crimes issues with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague. Finally, the Riga summit may also be used as an occasion to encourage the three Southeast European states who are the leading candidates the next wave of alliance enlargement, the Membership Action Plan countries Albania, Croatia, and Macedonia. U.S. backing for these countries' intensified mutual cooperation and support within the Adriatic Charter format was emphasized in spring 2006 by visits to all three capitals by U.S. Ambassador to NATO Victoria Nuland and by a joint meeting with the countries' Prime Ministers by U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney in Dubrovnik, Croatia in May.

C. Bilateral Partnerships

These NATO and subregional-initiatives overlap with U.S. steps to build closer bilateral security partnerships in the region. The region's

geopolitical location, bordering the Black Sea and Greater Middle East areas, in itself makes such relations of strategic interest. In addition, some advocates point out that though tragic reasons, unlike much of Europe several of the region's militaries have recent, intensive combat experience that may give them added-value in international operations.

Building these relationships can manifest itself in a variety of ways. One is expansion of education and training programs for partner country security personnel. Another is support and participation in U.S.-led operations in Iraq. Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Moldova, and Romania have all contributed troops, and Slovenia has provided police trainers. Still another is intelligence cooperation, especially in counterterrorism. Finally, a forth emerging example is military basing arrangements. In December 2005 and April 2006, respectively, the U.S. signed long-term agreements for shared use of several bases in Romania and Bulgaria. Speculation on possible additional base sites has included the continued use of existing U.S. facilities at Camp Bondsteel in a post-status talks Kosovo as well as on a naval base in newly independent Montenegro.⁶¹

In principle, there is no direct contradiction between closer strategic partnership with the U.S. and simultaneous further integration toward membership in the EU. In practice, however, tension and cross-pressure can arise. Two of the most prominent cases have concerned arrangements regarding the new standing International Criminal Court⁶² and reports of CIA-practiced "extraordinary rendition" of suspected terrorists.

⁶¹ Phillips, John. "Key Base Likely for Sale to U.S., Russia." *Washington Times*, 19 May 2006, p.15.

⁶² See Linden, Ronald. "Twin Peaks: Romania and Bulgaria between the EU and the United States". *Problems of Post-Communism*. Vol. 51, No. 5, September/October 2004, pp. 45–55; also Boduszynski, Mieczslaw and Kristina Balalovska. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Croatia, Macedonia, and the Battle Over Article 98". *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 51, No. 5, January/February 2004, pp. 18–30.

VI. Conclusion

The intensity and persistence of renewed U.S. engagement in Southeast Europe remains uncertain. The pull on America to move back on to other hotspots now coexists both with the concern it's not yet safe to do so and hoped-for opportunities for globally-oriented partnership. The former worry may again diminish with a rebound of EU leadership and the countries' "European perspective". The latter will depend on regional countries' own growth as well-governed, capable partners. In the best of all worlds, the United States will not feel an unavoidable need to stay but will nonetheless find remaining a strong presence an attractive proposition for many years to come.

Matthew Rhodes, Dr.
George C. Marshall Center, Garmisch-Partenkirchen