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Special Report

A Rare Window of Opportunity Opens for the US in the Balkans

Analysis. By Gregory R. Copley, Editor, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs. Events have conspired in the Eastern Mediterranean to open a new strategic opportunity for the United States, just as US-Turkish relations have moved into a profound downward direction.

Turkey, by moving further toward Russia as well as making its own bid to revive the Ottoman sphere of influence and a new pan-Turkism, has forced the US to consider strengthening its strategic and military relationship with other, long-neglected allies in the region. Washington has already begun rebuilding military-political ties with Greece — particularly with the election of the New Democracy Government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis — and Cyprus, and has begun to rebuild a strong alliance with Serbia.

Washington, indeed, has little choice. Serbia has been a great historical ally of the US, but was abandoned by the US in the break-up of Yugoslavia and the war which followed in the 1990s. The US Clinton Administration delivered unspeakable insults to its old ally by ensuring the erosion of its rights and its territory in the Dayton Accords of 1995, which cut the territory of the Bosnian Serbs by half; and then in carving out of Serbia's heartland a new, artificial "nation", based on a population of illegal Albanian immigrants: Kosovo. And yet today Kosovo offers the US no benefits, but only innumerable ongoing problems.

Kosovo was not universally recognized, as the US hoped, and even its initial recognition has been regretted by many governments which originally felt that they were acting to support the US. Some governments have gone to the extreme length of withdrawing recognition, to the point where today the governments of Albania and Kosovo are considering the creation of joint diplomatic legations internationally, so that Kosovo could, in essence, "piggyback" on Albania's more ready acceptance as a sovereign nation-state.

In this lies the seed of a solution for all parties.

Serbian Pres. Aleksandar Vučić has stepped up the search for a creative solution.

Serbia, despite being weakened by the results of the war of the 1990s, remains a critical and stable hub of South-Eastern Europe, as witnessed by the campaign by Russia to

build its influence with Belgrade. Can Russia have Turkey *and* the Balkans both? Would this provoke the US and EU too far?

And can Turkey, after its past several years of escalating hostility toward the US, expect to be rewarded with revived dominance over the Balkan states?

What are some of the key factors which lead to a strategic opening for the US, Serbia, Albania, and Kosovo, as well as providing a solution which would substantially ease the challenge of the Balkans for the European Union and NATO, and key member states such as Greece?

- **Turkey's Alliance with Russia:** Turkey, which sees itself as the key benefactor of Islam and as traditional overlord of the Balkans, has now created a *de facto* alliance of necessity with Russia. This is inimical to US, EU, and NATO interests, and particularly to the interests of Greece;
- **Turkey's Alliance with Iran:** The Turkish Government in 2019 created an express and explicit alliance with Iran to challenge US and Western interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf. Iran has been, with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and others, a principal driver in the use of the Balkans as a hub of Islamist-*jihadi* activities.
- **The Kosovo Problem:** The existence of a separate state of Kosovo has emerged as a problem for the US, a disaster for Serbia, and what is now emerging as an unrealizable dream for Albania. It has also emerged as a reality which cannot be resolved by merely attempting to force Serbia to accept the loss of lands which have the deepest and most iconic sense of centrality to Serbia's national saga of identity. How do all parties to the dilemma, including Russia (if it wishes to retain any of its historical friendship and leverage with Serbia), proceed toward resolution?

In July 2019, a Serbian professor, Dr Darko Trifunović, proposed a formula which could circumvent the need for Serbia to formally recognize Kosovo, but which could still provide both the Albanian Government and Kosovo Albanians with a unique opportunity to create a far more important geopolitical entity. At the same time, the move would substantially and positively impact the stability and strategic viability of Serbia while limiting the construction of a landbridge of Islamist activity of the type favored by Turkey and Iran into the heart of Europe.

Trifunović, who heads the Institute for National and International Security (INIS) in Belgrade, and who is a Senior Fellow of the International Strategic Studies Association, publisher of the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* reports, on July 27, 2019, proposed a framework of territorial exchanges.

These would see the northern, ethnically Serbian, area of Kosovo returned to Serbian control and a corridor of traditionally Serbian-populated Western Albania handed to Serbia to give it back its access to the Adriatic sea, in exchange for an acceptance of the merger of the Kosovo "state" into Albania, substantially expanding the geography of a "greater Albanian" state.

The area of Northern Albania ceded would be the traditionally Serbian lands, including, for example, the historical medieval Serbian city of Skadar, and its region, now called Shkoder. Albania would receive the Kosovo region south of the Ibar River.¹

Such an internationally-accepted enlarged Albania would resolve the issue for Albania and the Kosovo authorities of legitimizing the combined entity internationally.



This would provide Tiranë with the greatest Albanian strategic advance in centuries (while perhaps still not fully satiating the craving for a “Greater Albania” which seeks parts of Northern Macedonia and even Montenegro), but would also re-establish Serbian stability and prosperity to help guard the South-Eastern European framework of logistics, via the Danube-Sava rivers, and down to the Adriatic/Mediterranean.

There is no question that many Albanians and many Serbs will argue that such an exchange does not satisfy deep-seated historical quests, or restore iconic national heartlands (for Serbia), but such a gesture would be a strategic win-win for Serbia and the Albanians (of Albania and the Albanian diaspora in Kosovo). And it would resolve fundamental issues for Europe (not just the European Union), and the US.

Quite apart from current and projected geopolitical realities, the US has a particular historical engagement which it needs to consider: the commitment of the US by Pres. Woodrow Wilson, on January 6, 1918; the 14-point “Program for the Peace of the World”.

This was at the heart of Prof. Trifunović’s proposal insofar as engagement of US good offices toward the resolution of the Kosovo dispute was concerned. Wilson fully recog-

nized the uniquely heavy burden which Serbia shouldered in opposing the Triple Alliance powers around Germany in World War I, losing the largest number of its troops and civilians of any combatant power in the war. He ordered the Serbian flag to be flown over the White House as an unprecedented mark of respect.

Point XI of the 14 Points notes: “Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated [by foreign forces]; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea ...”

The longer the Kosovo problem degrades, from the US perspective, the more difficult it becomes for the sole US base in the Balkans, Camp Bondsteel, in Kosovo, to retain its utility. A resolution of the Kosovo situation in which Serbia recognizes an enlarged Albania which would include most of what is now Kosovo enhances the security and strategic viability of all. Greece, though remaining cautious of Albanian intentions toward both Greece and Northern Macedonia, could be expected, too, to support the outcome.

Prof. Trifunović noted: “A fair proposal should be made to [US Pres. Donald] Trump because he is pragmatic. The proposal would consist in the fact that we should have a dialogue directly with Tiranë and not with Priština.”

Footnotes:

1. Prof. Trifunović was quoted in the Serbian news site, www.alo.rs, on July 27, 2019, as saying: “This is our opportunity. A fair proposal should be made to [US Pres. Donald] Trump because he is pragmatic. The proposal would consist in the fact that we should have a dialogue directly with Tiranë and not with Priština. How could we talk to someone suspected of war crimes (such as [Kosovo Pres. and Kosovo Liberation Army founder/leader Hachim] Thaçi, [Kosovo Liberation Army leader] Kadri Veseli, and [Kosovo Liberation Army leader Ramush] Haradinaj ... The proposal is that Serbia would exchange territories with Albania; that is, in exchange for what is south of [the] Ibar [river], Serbia would receive the Shkoder region with [the ancient Serbian city of] Shkodra [Skadar]. Serbs in enclaves should receive the maximum protection [as is] enjoyed by Albanians in Serbia, and the same should apply to monasteries.” Asked if he feared whether individuals would accuse him of making the “Greater Albania” through such a land exchange, he replied: “How do I make a Greater Albania when I advocate that Serbia go out to sea? It is a fair proposal and a compromise and so everyone would get something and everyone would lose something. And then we would not have to recognize Kosovo. We should deliver this proposal to [Pres.] Trump as soon as possible, and we can do it through our friends in Israel. I am convinced that the US President would support this proposal. Any party which rejected the resolution would have America on its back and would then be pressured by sanctions. Such a solution can in no way affect Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), which was made on the basis of the Dayton Agreement, because the proposed understanding with Albania would be a mutual exchange of territories.”