

# Explaining Russia's Dissention on Kosovo

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Russia's disagreement with the West on the recent crisis in Kosovo and its opposition to NATO's decision to use military force against Serbia were particularly bitter. In trying to explain Russia's opposition to military strikes against Yugoslavia, Western observers have argued that Russia is trying to preserve its great-power status in international conflicts through "residual imperialism." Many also attribute Russia's policy to its obsession with a "mystic pan-Slavic mission" and longstanding historical commitments to stand by the Serbs. Russian policy in Kosovo (or Iraq) is also portrayed as an attempt to appease the domestic national-patriotic opposition. Finally, Moscow's position on the Kosovo crisis has been interpreted as arising from its concern with territorial integrity and its own bloody conflict in the breakaway region of Chechnya. Most of these motives are of an emotional, psychological and cultural nature. While they might make it easier to dismiss the factors driving Russia's foreign policy as largely irrational and explain away everything as Moscow's retrospective thinking, they do not shed light on the real nature of Russian foreign policy.

Russia's "post-imperialist" ambitions are gravely exaggerated as a driving factor of Russian foreign policy at the end of the 20th century. Russia indeed has suffered a painful erosion of its international prestige since the Soviet collapse. While it certainly took the Russian political elite time to adapt to the loss of a global empire and to realize that Soviet global ambitions led to an obvious overstretch of the country's economic and political resources, the most Russia seeks as a long-term strategic goal is to become an independent power center in a "multipolar world" that is still in the making.

Concerning "mystic pan-Slavism," the image of Serbia and Russia as centuries-old Slavic friends and allies is oversimplified at best. A distinction must be made between traditional ties between Russian and Serbian people (based on a common historical, cultural, and religious background) and relations between the two governments, which have been extremely complicated throughout history. In certain historical periods Russia and Serbia had close ties: both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, pursuing their own national interests, helped Belgrade to solve its nation/state-building problems. These periods of rapprochement were, however, followed by years of estrangement and mutual distrust. Both after 1878 as well as after 1945 Belgrade, having achieved its strategic goals with the help of Russia (including military assistance) refused to go along with Moscow. It sought instead to become a regional power center in the Balkans--a goal that directly contradicted Russia's interests in the region, which aimed at achieving a balance of forces that Moscow could successfully divide and rule. Yes, Russia remains a power

that had once played a major role in helping Balkan peoples build their statehood. However, the contemporary foreign policies of Balkan states are motivated not by Russia's past merits but by its present inability to help them integrate into the world economy. That is primarily why most Balkan countries have turned away from Russia to NATO and the European Union. Moscow has no illusions about the possibility of rebuilding its uneven influence in the Balkans through friendly relations with Belgrade. Rather, pan-Slavic rhetoric by some Russian leaders and politicians is used primarily as a tool of political/ideological manipulation: Russia's political elite is too rational to sincerely share these ideas.

Domestically, the recent Kosovo crisis has been one of the few international developments to galvanize the attention of the Russian foreign policy elite. Instead of being driven by attempts to appease domestic opposition, Russian foreign policy since early 1996 (when Yevgeni Primakov replaced Andrei Kozyrev as foreign minister) has become one of the few areas of national politics where a semblance of nation-wide consensus has emerged. With Primakov as prime minister since 1998, Western experts correctly predicted a tougher Russian stance in the Balkans and the Middle East (although President Yeltsin is not likely to radically alter his pro-Western policy). Russia's foreign policy elites agree on Russia's involvement in the Balkan crisis, and share anti-Western and especially anti-American sentiments with regard to the post-Yugoslav conflicts. This anti-Western stance is shared by both the left and the right including many liberals and even radical democrats. This is best demonstrated by a series of almost unanimous votes by the State Duma on some 45 declarations and resolutions on the situation in Kosovo as of March 1999.

The only basis for Russian and Serbian rapprochement is the insoluble dilemma (seen in Kosovo and Chechnya) between self-determination (and secession) and the territorial integrity of sovereign states. Nevertheless, differences between the two states prevail: Russia is a major nuclear power; Chechnya is not the cradle of Russia's history and culture; there is no Chechen-populated "Albania" bordering Chechnya in the Caucasus, etc.

This is not to say that these factors do not have any impact on Russia's policy on Kosovo, but to point out that this impact is marginal compared to other considerations. *The key to understanding Russia's policy on the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, as well as Russia's opposition to NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia, is realizing that it is only remotely related to the conflict itself.*

Russia's policy in post-Cold War European conflicts can be understood only through the prism of Moscow's complicated relations with the North Atlantic alliance and bitter opposition to the process of NATO expansion. Although the first stage of this process is over, the main source of Russian concerns remains: Moscow still views NATO as a weapon aimed primarily at Russia, and NATO expansion as a hedge against any "future revival" of Russian power. The fact that formal accession of the three new members into NATO was almost immediately followed by the alliance's attack on a sovereign European non-NATO state elevates this potential threat. Ironically, the combination of

NATO's eastward expansion with the Alliance's internal transformation (the latter long viewed by Russia as a "positive" alternative to the Alliance's external adaptation) has become a matter of growing concern for Moscow. As suggested by its New Strategic Concept, which prescribes the alliance's role and direction for years to come, NATO (an organization to which Russia is not a member) seeks to become the sole guarantor of European, if not global, security. Even before the New Strategic Concept was worked out, NATO's CJTF concept offered ways to use NATO assets for out-of-area activities without changing the NATO Treaty.

One of the most threatening directions of NATO's internal transformation is its potential to provide for rapid deployment to distant areas. American policymakers have noted that political turmoil in parts of the former Soviet Union over the next decade increases the likelihood of US military involvement, including international peace operations, in former Soviet republics. NATO's lack of geographic clarity about where it is ready to deploy forces, its determination to keep collective defense requirements, and its readiness for "out-of-area" missions outside the Article 5 collective defense mandate are viewed by Russia as a dangerous mix.

NATO-Russia cooperation has so far failed to dispel these concerns. For Moscow, the "Partnership for Peace" program has proved to be nothing more than a foundation for NATO expansion. The Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris on May 27, 1997 was supposed to establish a cooperative, contractual basis for NATO-Russia relations, but has contributed only minimally to European security and stability. A major problem for Russia is that the Founding Act does not prevent further NATO expansion. A second reason for this failure is that close cooperation with NATO works for Russia only in cases where there is not much political disagreement, as with IFOR/SFOR in Bosnia. In most other cases, including areas near the former Soviet Union, political disagreements are more likely. This situation is only aggravated by the formal entrance into NATO of the three new members.

It comes as no surprise then that the crisis in Kosovo has focused Russian foreign policy elites' attention on NATO activities in the region. US/NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia are viewed in Russia as a logical progression, given NATO's efforts to become the sole security organization in Europe. NATO's decision to launch air strikes against Serbia without formal clearance from the UN Security Council was interpreted in Moscow as a dangerous international precedent and a final blow to the remainder of the post-World War II international system.

So, the magnitude and consistency of Moscow's opposition to NATO military action against Yugoslavia is due to the threat of Western power--perceived as directed against Russia or its closest neighbors--moving close to Russia's own borders at a time when the country's economy and military are in shambles. For Russia, resisting a US policy of creating a series of protectorates (first Bosnia, then Macedonia, with Kosovo waiting its turn) is not just a matter of principle but a matter of its own security, if not survival.

Moscow's harsh but reasonably restrained opposition to NATO military action against Yugoslavia is perhaps the Russian government's first major foreign policy move driven primarily by rationally interpreted Russian national interests. The fact that Russia's influence in the regions outside its own borders is sharply limited by both internal and external conditions makes it all the more pressing for Moscow to use whatever means and resources it still possesses in a more effective and creative manner.

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