
Kosovo Russian ambitions and American mistakes

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On December 19, the UN Security Council will discuss Kosovo settlement for the umpteenth and probably last time. Let's look at this problem through the eyes of the key decision-makers - Russia and the United States.

Russia is now in a very difficult position. It will not accept any options for the solution of the problem discussed at the UN Security Council with the exception of freezing it. It can either try to suspend the final settlement on end or, should several major powers recognize Kosovo's independence, try to prevent others from following their example.

The main point is that in case of Kosovo's massive recognition, Russia will sustain a tangible loss of face in addition to the so far unclear geopolitical risks.

Much has been said about the threat of Kosovo's independence causing shifts in the entire international legal platform. It will create a precedent for sealing the claims of current and future separatists. They are bound to use Kosovo's scenario for legalizing their positions. This issue may cause a split in international alliances, which is already taking place in the European Union - Germany is afraid of future problems in Europe; Cyprus, which has been split for more than a decade, and Spain are also worried.

Now let's assume that the ultimatum of the United States and part of the EU leads to success - Kosovo acquires formal statehood and none of Russia's warnings materialize. The world is not collapsing and there is no parade of sovereignties. Does this mean that Russia was wrong?

After the Balkan nations, the CIS is the second area most likely to be affected by Kosovo's precedent. But the warnings about Moscow's potential unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are unlikely. Russia will not radicalize its policy to this point. Analysts, especially those from the South Caucasus, often overrate the Kremlin's possibilities and desires in this sphere although it is from them that the West is catching the idea of Russian adventurism.

If the U.S.-led group of pro-Kosovo countries wins, it will appear that Russia was fighting against wind mills, as if reaffirming Condoleezza Rice's words: "And if you don't deal with that reality, you're only going to sow the seeds of considerable discontent and considerable instability." If this happens, Russia with its alarmist appeals may be simply ignored, which would be a blow to Moscow's entire foreign policy.

But it will be even worse for Moscow if it proves correct and the problems with Eurasian separatists develop as predicted. Russia will immediately get two serious conflicts at its regional boundaries. Abkhazia and South Ossetia will seek recognition following Kosovo's example even without Moscow's participation, in which case tensions with Georgia are bound to escalate, attracting even more attention of international community to Georgian conflicts. This is not in Russia's interests, especially considering the upcoming winter Olympics in Sochi. Moscow's official position on the Georgian conflicts has always been based on the lengthy negotiating process and emphasis on the recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity.

To summarize, any settlement of the Kosovo crisis will land Russia into a predicament. Why has Russian diplomacy found itself in such an unpleasant

position? The answer is trivial - Russia has not been rocking any boats in Europe or the rest of the world and a position of restraint is always less beneficial. Russia is adhering to the old rules - the 1975 commitments of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) not to violate European borders.

For all the minuses of Russian politics, the blame should be laid at the American door. US policy is driven by inertia. Having once opted for a line, Washington cannot change direction, even if it realizes how senseless the escalation is. Iraq is a typical case in point. Likewise, once Washington has decided once and for all that Milosevic and Serbia are to blame for the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, it cannot stop. The cumbersome U.S. geopolitical machine is very slow - the 1999 bombings are a thing of the past; Milosevic has long died in a prison cell, and war tribunals have lasted forever - but irrational pressure on Serbia is going on, the inertia of the effort to finish off the enemy is still there - just the same as in the Iraqi campaign. In much the same manner, Russia is no longer the U.S.S.R. but it is still on the list of major enemies.

There is one more argument to explain the U.S. position on Kosovo. Washington seems to be confident that Kosovo is a good way to show its support for the Muslim world, this time in the war against the Serbs who will always be guilty before the Kosovars. This is a clear signal to the Islamic world - the United States supports you if justice is on your side. In the eyes of the U.S. this position justifies the Americans in other conflicts where the positions of Islamic and American policymakers are hostile.

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