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The Big Question: Would the Balkans flare up again if Kosovo declared independence?

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Why are we asking this now?

Because international mediators are holding their final talks on the future of Kosovo with the leaders of Serbia and the breakaway province before a UN-imposed deadline of 10 December. The ethnic Albanians of Kosovo, who make up 90 per cent of the province's population of two million, are threatening to declare unilateral independence in the absence of an agreement by that date, and if you listen to the harbingers of doom they will go ahead and pitch Kosovo into another round of blood-letting that could feed ethnic strife across the Balkans. The flashpoint would be in the northern part of Kosovo, where the Serb minority of 100,000 is concentrated.

How likely is this?

Although the ethnic Albanians are getting increasingly impatient, and have just elected an erstwhile guerrilla leader, Hashim Thaci, as Prime Minister, the most likely scenario is that the Americans and Europeans will be able to maintain pressure on the Kosovo leaders to delay an independence declaration until at least the New Year. Because when it comes down to it, Mr Thaci and the government in Pristina know that Kosovo cannot survive without foreign help, in terms of economic aid and security.

Has there been any unrest so far?

Things have remained quiet but there are hotheads with guns in the province who could react violently, if, as expected, the negotiations mediated by envoys from the EU, Russia and the US fail to produce a breakthrough. And the date of 10 December looms ominously, carrying with it the risk of violence.

How is the wider world reacting?

The big powers have lined up behind the opposing sides in the dispute, further raising the stakes, with America firmly behind the Kosovars and supporting the principle of independence, while Russia supports Serbia, which is just as firmly opposed to Kosovo being allowed to break away, even under internationally supervised independence. The Serbs and Russians point out that if the international community



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were to endorse independence, it could fan independence movements from the Basque country to Chechnya.

What's the plan on the table?

The one proposed by the international mediators is known as the Ischinger plan, named after the EU envoy (and German ambassador to the UK) Wolfgang Ischinger, which would provide for a "status-neutral" Kosovo – without mentioning emotively-charged "independence". It would define relations between Serbia and Kosovo and allow them to be normalised. Mr Ischinger leads the "troika" of international mediators which also includes former American diplomat Frank Wisner and Aleksandr Botsan-Kharchenko of Russia. But the Russians and Serbia are sceptical about the plan. Mr Ischinger himself recognises that there is not much chance of a successful outcome before 10 December.

Anything else under consideration?

A compromise "Hong Kong solution" which would freeze Kosovo's status for the next 12 years. Or a plan based on the type of autonomy held by Finland's Aland islands, which control their own affairs, apart from security and foreign policy. Neither option is being seriously discussed. Partition and a mooted confederation have also been rejected.

So how did we get to this point?

Kosovo remains formally a Serbian province, but has been administered by the UN since the Nato bombing campaign of 1999 forced Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic to pull back his forces, which had cracked down on ethnic Albanian separatists and expelled Kosovars from their homes. A total of 16,000 Nato peacekeepers are still deployed in Kosovo.

UN-sponsored negotiations on the future status of Kosovo began last year, and last February, former Finnish President Marti Ahtisaari unveiled his plan, providing for internationally supervised independence. But the plan was scuppered by the threat of a Russian veto at the UN Security Council last July, and the troika were given one last chance to negotiate a solution with Belgrade and Pristina.

What's the likeliest outcome to all this?

De facto independence for Kosovo under EU supervision, with the EU setting up a civilian mission that would replace that of the UN in Pristina. Security would continue to be provided by Nato, and the minority rights of the Serbs would be explicitly protected. The EU, however, is divided over independence at this stage, with Spain (because of the Basques), pro-Slav Greece and Cyprus balking at the prospect.



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If the EU can remain united, there are hopes that Kosovo independence could be recognised early next year by the EU and US and the plan could be put in place after that. The big carrot, of course, for Serbia to agree is the prospect of EU membership, which might make the Serbian leadership think twice before ordering counter-measures such as trade sanctions that would punish Kosovo for declaring unilateral independence. The key thing is to ensure that a declaration of independence for Kosovo goes hand in hand with recognition. For as Mr Thaci knows, independence without recognition is worth nothing.

What about Russia?

President Vladimir Putin has made it plain that Russia continues to oppose independence for Kosovo, as long as Serbia remains opposed to it, and believes that if no agreement is reached by 10 December, the talks should be extended. Mr Ischinger ruled out any extension yesterday.

Russia can be expected to react somehow in the case of an independence declaration, possibly in unpredictable ways that could cause a foreign policy headache for the West. Returning to the UN Security Council would mean a Russian veto on UN recognition, although some countries may decide to confront Russia on that.

Has the West mishandled Kosovo?

Definitely. The West took the Russians for granted until Western powers suddenly realised last summer that President Putin was serious about vetoing a UN resolution that would have endorsed the last plan drawn up by Mr Ahtisaari. The Americans and Europeans had got so used to having the Russians follow along with their foreign policy plans that they misjudged the belligerent mood in the newly assertive Russia.

Should Kosovo be independent?

Yes...

- * The ethnic Albanian population wants it and should be allowed to achieve the status enjoyed by other states of two million people
- * Continued delays will only increase the risk of violence that could spill across the Balkans
- * It is time the rest of the world called Russia's bluff to allow Kosovo its freedom

No...

- * Kosovo is too small a player on the world stage to risk a proxy war between America and Russia breaking out



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