



KOSOVO

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A crisis of West's own making

By Neil Clark, The Australian

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Powerful Western nations make threats to Serbia. Serbia, backed by Russia, ignores the ultimatums. A war ensues. That was the scenario in the summer of 1914, when the world plunged into the war to end all wars. Nearly a century on, the situation is uncannily similar.

Despite Western threats for it to accept Kosovan independence, Belgrade is standing firm. Serbian armed forces are on standby to reclaim the province by force if necessary. Russia has promised Serbia its support.

If war does follow, then Serbia will no doubt be blamed by Western governments for not toeing the line. But it would be an unfair judgment.

The present crisis in Kosovo has been caused not so much by Serbian intransigence, but by the West's policy of intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, which, over the past decade has caused chaos, not only in the Balkans, but across the globe.

Ten years ago, Kosovo was at relative peace. Albanian demands for independence from Belgrade were being channeled through the peaceful Democratic League party of Ibrahim Rugova, while the small groups of Albanian paramilitaries that did exist were isolated and had little public support.

According to a report by Jane's intelligence agency in 1996, the Kosovo Liberation Army, the most extreme of Albanian paramilitary groups, does not take into consideration the political or economic importance of its victims, nor does it seem at all capable of hurting its enemy.

It has not come close to challenging the region's balance of military power. As late as November 1997, the KLA, officially classified by the US as a terrorist organisation, could, it has been estimated, call on the services of only 200 men.

Then, in a policy shift whose repercussions we are witnessing today, the West started to interfere big time. The US, Germany and Britain increasingly saw the KLA as a proxy force which could help them achieve their goal of destabilising and eventually removing from power the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, which showed no inclination to join Euro-Atlantic structures.



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Over the following year, the KLA underwent a drastic makeover. The group was taken off the US State Department's list of terrorist organisations and, as with the Mujahideen in Afghanistan a decade or so earlier, became fully fledged freedom fighters.

Large-scale assistance was given to the KLA by Western security forces. Britain organised secret training camps in northern Albania. The German secret service provided uniforms, weapons and instructors.

The Sunday Times in Britain published a report stating that American intelligence agents admitted they helped to train the KLA before NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, Rugova's Democratic League, which supported negotiations with Belgrade, was given the cold shoulder.

When the KLA's campaign of violence, directed not only against Yugoslav state officials, Serb civilians and Albanian collaborators who did not support their extremist agenda, led to a military response from Belgrade, the British and Americans were ready to hand out the ultimatums.

During the 79-day NATO bombing of Yugoslavia that followed, the West made promises of independence to the KLA which, eight years on, are coming back to haunt them.

Recognising an independent Kosovo will push Serbia from the Western orbit as well as creating a real chance of war. And it will set a precedent: if the rights of self-determination for Kosovan Albanians are to be acknowledged, then what about the rights of self-determination for Serbs in Bosnia, who wish to join Serbia?

Doing a U-turn, and attempting to get independence postponed, runs the risk of violence from Kosovo's Albanian majority. It's an almighty mess, but one of the West's own making.

Had it not intervened in Yugoslav internal affairs 10 years ago, it is likely a peaceful compromise to the Kosovan problem would eventually have been found between the government in Belgrade and the Democratic League. Rugova's goal was independence for Kosovo from Serbia, but only with the agreement of all parties.

What is certain is that without Western patronage the KLA would never have grown to the force it eventually became.

By championing the most hardline force in Kosovo, the West not only helped precipitate war, but made the issue of Kosovo much harder to solve.



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It is ironic that for supporters of liberal intervention, Western actions in Kosovo are still seen to have been a great success. It was at the height of the NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 that the then British prime minister, Tony Blair, made his famous speech at Chicago in which he outlined his doctrine of the international community.

Blair argued that the principle of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states - long considered an important principle of international order - should be subject to revision. "I say to you: never fall again for the doctrine of isolationism," Blair pleaded.

But after surveying the global debris of a decade of Western interference, from the Balkans to Afghanistan and Iraq, is it any wonder that isolationism and observing the principle of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states again seems so appealing?

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