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U.S. Foreign Policy in Kosovo

A Brief Introduction from Bush to Biden

Policy Brief

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Introduction

U.S. engagement in the former Yugoslavia did not begin in earnest or develop into a robust foreign policy scheme until the years immediately following World War II, at which point it proceeded in two phases. The first phase occurred during the Cold War, from 1947 to 1991, and was catalyzed by President Harry Truman.¹ At this point Kosovo was a province of the Yugoslav republic of Serbia, thus its relations with the U.S. were inextricably linked to those of Yugoslavia and the larger Soviet-American conflict. But despite the influence of Soviet principles on Yugoslavia, Josip Tito's unwavering commitment to a policy of nonalignment and disdain for Soviet intermeddling in his country's affairs created opportunities for President Truman and the U.S. foreign policy establishment to contain the spread of communism and an increasingly ambitious Soviet Union.² So began a foreign policy towards Yugoslavia involving steady economic and military support that would continue mostly uninterrupted under subsequent administrations until the end of President George H.W. Bush's tenure in 1993.³

The second phase began with the election of President Bill Clinton in 1992. The Soviet Union had collapsed, bringing with it an end to the Cold War, U.S. hegemony, and a radical shift in American foreign policy. No longer was the emphasis on containment of Soviet ideology and aggression but was instead on promoting a liberal democratic world order, linking international markets through increased trade and open borders, and establishing a global society in which people everywhere could live with dignity and security.⁴ A new emphasis was placed on coalition building and multilateral intervention, bolstering the legitimacy and expanding the mandate of security organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and economic partnerships like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (eventually the World Trade Organization (WTO)).⁵ Foreign policy decisions no longer depended on preserving traditional U.S. security interests but were increasingly justified on humanitarian grounds. So long as the risk to U.S. service members was reasonably limited and the threat to civilians reasonably grave, the U.S. seemed poised to intervene.⁶

This calculus at least partly explains President Clinton's decision to contribute air support to the NATO coalition tasked with expelling Serbian forces from Kosovo, where ethnic Serbs were engaged in the systematic persecution of minority ethnic Albanians.⁷ Informed by NATO's successful involvement in the Bosnia War, which relied on air and ground forces to bring an end to the conflict and prevent ethnic cleansing occurring there, Clinton believed a similar result could be achieved in Kosovo, namely a swift victory in the name of humanitarianism that posed little danger to U.S. service members but significant promise for a liberal democratic world order.⁸ Importantly, this was the first time NATO inserted itself into a conflict in Yugoslavia, and at the time it was the largest operation the organization had ever undertaken.⁹

U.S. participation in the Kosovo War, which contributed to driving Serbian forces out, marked the high point of American involvement in Kosovo. American air support was regarded as crucial to, but not decisive in, Operation Allied Force's success and no lives were lost in the process.¹⁰ Indeed, American intervention under President Clinton is primarily responsible for Kosovo's exceptionally

¹ Pierre Maurer, "United States-Yugoslav Relations: A Marriage of Convenience," *Studia Diplomatica* 38, no. 4 (1985): 432.

² Maurer, "United States-Yugoslav Relations," 431-34.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ James Kurth, "First Wave of the Global Era: Kosovo and U.S. Grand Strategy," in *War Over Kosovo*, eds. Andrew T Bacevich & Eliot A Cohen (Columbia University Press, 2001), 67-68.

⁵ Kurth, "First War of the Global Era," 74-76.

⁶ David Hastings Dunn, "Innovation & Precedent in the Kosovo War: The Impact of Operation Allied Force on U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (May, 2009): 533.

⁷ Kurth, "First War of the Global Era," 76-77.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Benjamin S. Lambeth, "Operation Allied Force: Lessons for the Future," RAND Corporation, 2001, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB75.html.

¹⁰ Kurth, "First War of the Global Era," 84-86; Lambeth, "Operation Allied Force."

pro-American attitude.¹¹ In the years following Clinton's term however, U.S. foreign policy towards Kosovo reached another inflection point, becoming an increasingly lower priority as the U.S. turned its attention to other parts of the world, including regional conflicts in the Middle East.¹² While engagement certainly has not stopped, actions taken have been largely insufficient and ineffective. In the face of increased pressure from international competitors like China and Russia, whose aspirations abroad and anti-democratic systems of government threaten the liberal democratic world order contemplated and advanced by a post Cold War American-European alliance, nascent democracies like Kosovo face a grave threat from an apathetic, disengaged U.S. foreign policy.

The balance of this paper will look at U.S. foreign policy under previous presidential administrations, beginning with President Bush in 1989 and continuing through President Trump. It will then make the argument that, in light of varied approaches utilized in the past, President Biden must rely on his extensive foreign policy experience and implement a modified scheme in Kosovo and the Balkans if he is to successfully promote U.S. interests in Southeastern Europe. President Biden must continue advocating for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, develop Kosovo's economy with a particular emphasis on agriculture and energy, legitimize Kosovo's independence within the international community, and work directly with Kosovo's recently elected administration to bolster democratic institutions. Not only has an active, tailored foreign policy in Kosovo been continuous and bipartisan since the early days of the Cold War, such an approach will advance our economic and security interests, including Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkan region, securing the region's energy sources, increasing regional investment and commercial development, advancing and strengthening Kosovo's rule of law institutions, and ensuring equal treatment and access to all blocs of Kosovo society. It will also signal to the rest of the world President Biden's commitment to repairing U.S. alliances and partnerships denigrated by President Trump and ensure long lasting peace and prosperity in Kosovo.¹³

¹¹ Stacy Sullivan, "Kosovo's America Obsession," Time, <https://time.com/kosovo-independence-america-obsession/>.

¹² Gorana Grgic, "The prospects of relative neglect – U.S. foreign policy in the Western Balkans under President Trump," European Leadership Network, May 19, 2017, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-prospects-of-relative-neglect-u-s-foreign-policy-in-the-western-balkans-under-president-trump/>.

¹³ Maurer, "United States-Yugoslav Relations," 434; Visar Xhambazi, "The Western Balkans: An Opportunity for Biden to Restore US Foreign Policy," The Globe Post, December 3, 2020, <https://theglobepost.com/2020/12/03/western-balkans-biden/>.

George H.W. Bush

(1989-1993)



President George H.W. Bush's foreign policy legacy is largely defined by his role in Russia's transition following the collapse of the Soviet Union and successful intervention in Kuwait after its invasion by neighboring Iraq.¹⁴ His approach, known as the New World Order, sought the continued breakdown of lingering communist influence in Europe and the realization of liberal democracy in its place.¹⁵ While Bush appeared open to notions of collective security and international cooperation, his commitment to pragmatism and conservatism (i.e. cautiousness) was apparent and at least partly explains his unwillingness to completely commit to countries in need of assistance.¹⁶

In the Balkans, the Bush administration was not entirely disengaged, but it proved reluctant to move beyond diplomacy or threats of military deployment. Bush's cautiousness was on display in his response to the Bosnian War when he resisted calls by members of Congress and foreign policy experts to adopt a policy of "lift and strike," which involved lifting a United Nations imposed arms embargo and funneling modern U.S. military equipment to Bosnian and Herzegovinian forces.¹⁷

When Bush entered office, Kosovo was locked in bitter conflict stemming from ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs, specifically a power shift led by the nationalist and ruthless authoritarian leader Slobodan Milosevic. Control over Kosovo's politics fell squarely in the hands of a Serbia-controlled puppet regime, changes to Serbia's constitution stripped Kosovo of any provincial autonomy, and illegitimate assembly votes were validated via armed force.¹⁸ These changes caused a substantial degradation of the rights and freedoms of ethnic Albanians and provided fodder for the Kosovo War in 1999.

Rather than send troops to Kosovo or use its outsized influence in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to persuade allies to intervene, the Bush administration relied on diplomacy, urging Serbia and Yugoslavian provinces, including Kosovo, to engage in democratic processes and avoid conflict, and reminding Yugoslavia that any violent intrusions into Kosovo's affairs would be met with the mite of the American military.¹⁹ His approach was indeed cautious and pragmatic, sounding strong and forceful and taking the moral, idealized high ground while avoiding the political costs of yet another military engagement overseas.

¹⁴ Stephen Knott, "George H.W. Bush: Foreign Affairs," University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/bush/foreign-affairs>.

¹⁵ Knott, "George H.W. Bush."

¹⁶ Knott, "George H.W. Bush."

¹⁷ Laura Silber and Alan Little, *The Death of Yugoslavia* (London: Penguin/BBC Books, 1996), 254.

¹⁸ Simone Bogedal, "The Kosovo-Serbia Conflict And Foreign Intervention," *The Organization of World Peace*, June 9, 2021, <https://theowp.org/reports/the-kosovo-serbia-conflict-and-foreign-intervention/>.

¹⁹ New York Times, "Crises in the Balkans; Statements of United States' policy on Kosovo," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/18/world/crisis-in-the-balkans-statements-of-united-states-policy-on-kosovo.html>.

Bill Clinton

(1993-2001)



Unlike his predecessor, President Bill Clinton entered office with little foreign policy experience.²⁰ The foreign policy scheme on which he settled was more active than Bush's and embodied a doctrine of enlargement.²¹ While attempts to expand liberal democracy globally, increase free trade, and engage in multilateral peacekeeping remained foreign policy fixtures, Clinton appeared more willing to commit forces where practical, meaning engagement presented little cost financially or in terms of U.S. lives.²²

Initially, Clinton's activist approach was more imaginary than real. He ended U.S. engagement in Somalia and decided not to intervene in the Rwandan genocide shortly thereafter.²³ In Haiti, however, Clinton successfully orchestrated the removal of a military dictator who had overthrown the country's democratically elected president, threatening a U.S. invasion if the former did not step down and committing troops to ensure a peaceful transition.²⁴

Clinton's biggest foreign policy win occurred in Kosovo later in his tenure and embodied his adherence to calculated intervention. Clinton's decision to intervene in Kosovo came at precisely the right moment, after all previous steps to deter escalation proved unsuccessful. Clinton was likely spurred to act in an effort to prevent a repeat of the atrocities that occurred in Bosnia and Herzegovina, during which Serbian forces systematically killed non-combatants and committed genocide.²⁵ After galvanizing support in NATO and convincing the organization to begin a bombing campaign on Serbia strongholds, which eventually led to the signing of a peace accord, Clinton committed 20,000 U.S. troops to a larger NATO coalition tasked with enforcing a cease fire agreement and ensuring free and fair elections throughout Kosovo's rebuilding process.²⁶ U.S. and NATO intervention was largely welcomed by Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population and explains in large part why the United States remains overwhelmingly popular in Kosovo today.²⁷

²⁰ Russell L. Riley, "Bill Clinton: Foreign Affairs," University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/clinton/foreign-affairs>.

²¹ Riley, "Bill Clinton."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Riley, "Bill Clinton."

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sullivan, "Kosovo's America Obsession."

George W. Bush

(2001-2009)



The second Bush administration took on a hawkish foreign policy approach, but its attention was largely confined to the Middle East. Defined by the War on Terror, spurred by the 9/11 attacks, and sustained through U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and then Iraq, President George W. Bush's active approach resulted in one of the most protracted and controversial military engagements since the Vietnam War. His foreign policy was largely tailored to this endeavor and had as its objectives preventive wars, unilateral action to defend domestic and international interests, and the spread of democracy and free trade.²⁸

As governor of Texas and presidential candidate, statements by Bush and his running mate made clear their administration would not support the continued presence of U.S. troops in Kosovo, stationed there as part of the NATO peacekeeping coalition enforcing a ceasefire agreement with Serbia.²⁹ Bush relied on soft power tactics such as diplomacy and public sentiment to shape U.S. interests in the Balkans, and he was the last U.S. president to show serious and significant engagement in the region. As president, Bush went on record supporting Kosovo's campaign for independence from Serbia.³⁰ In 2007, Bush became the first U.S. president to visit Albania, a move that proved immensely popular with Kosovo's Albanian-majority citizenry, and the Bush administration pushed for Albanian and Croatian membership to NATO.³¹ In 2008, when Kosovo officially declared independence from Serbia, the Bush administration issued a statement the following day backing the move. Finally, Bush supported United Nations' membership for several Balkan countries, including Kosovo, a crucial step for international recognition and participation in international security and trade agreements.³²

While actions by the Bush administration moved the needle closer to an independent and secure Balkan region, for example Kosovo's declaration of independence and Albania's NATO membership, certain longstanding issues persisted. The question of Kosovo's independence remained highly controversial in the international sphere, Russia and other foreign powers continued to wield influence, and Serbia-Kosovo dialogue remained strained and unproductive. A major obstacle was Russian opposition to Kosovo's independence and Russia's membership to the United Nations Security Council, which allowed it to veto any peacekeeping operations, economic sanctions, or military action in Kosovo or the Balkan region.³³

²⁸ Gary L. Gregg II, "George W. Bush: Foreign Affairs," University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/gwbush/foreign-affairs>.

²⁹ Michael R. Gordon, "The 2000 Campaign: The Military; Bush Would Stop U.S. Peacekeeping In Balkan Fights," The New York Times, October 21, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/21/us/the-2000-campaign-the-military-bush-would-stop-us-peacekeeping-in-balkan-fights.html>.

³⁰ Tabassum Zakaria and Ellie Tzortzi, "Bush Says Kosovo To Be Independent, Delights Albania," Reuters, June 10, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bush-albania/bush-says-kosovo-to-be-independent-delights-albania-idUSTZO01747120070610>.

³¹ Ian Traynor, "Bush Insists Kosovo Must Be Independent and Receives Hero's Welcome in Albania," The Guardian, June 10, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/11/balkans.usa>; Donna Miles, "Bush Endorses NATO Membership for Albania, Croatia," Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, October 26, 2008, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/25568/bush-endorses-nato-membership-albania-croatia>.

³² George W. Bush, "President Bush Discusses Kosovo," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, February 19, 2008, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/02/20080219-7.html>.

³³ Louis Charbonneau, "An Independent Kosovo can never join U.N.: Russia," Reuters, January 16, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-kosovo-un/an-independent-kosovo-can-never-join-u-n-russia-idUSN165309320080117>.

Barack Obama

(2009-2017)



A common critique leveled against President Barack Obama was his lack of a coherent foreign policy doctrine, choosing instead to handle individual crisis on a case-by-case basis.³⁴ Obama deprioritized U.S. involvement in both Kosovo and the Balkan region and focused instead on new and continuing security objectives in the Middle East (e.g. War on Terror & ISIS, Iran's nuclear program, Libyan dictatorship), economic objectives in Asia (e.g. reducing barriers to trans-pacific trade and commerce), and global environmental initiatives (e.g. the Paris Agreement).³⁵ Similarly, like Bush junior and senior, Obama adhered to the belief that Europe was responsible for resolving disputes in its own backyard, including any continuing controversy between Serbia and Kosovo.³⁶

To claim Obama deprioritized the Balkans is not to say he ignored the region completely, relying on diplomacy to promote Kosovo's interests and counter Russian influence in the region. The Obama administration regarded the European Union as primarily responsible for the Balkan situation and the U.S.'s role as providing support and encouragement to EU efforts as needed. In this regard, Obama relied heavily on the extensive diplomatic and foreign policy experience of cabinet officials like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden.³⁷ In the days following the announcement that international supervision of Kosovo's independence had ended, for example, Secretary Clinton released a statement in support, recognizing the move as bringing Kosovo one step closer to Euro-Atlantic integration and participation.³⁸

Obama also introduced a new tone to Kosovo-Serbia discussions, focusing less on ethnic tension and disputed independence and instead on issues of trade, foreign direct investment, and normalization of military relations.³⁹ His policy was one of counterbalancing, seeking to limit regional reliance on international adversaries like Russia, China and Turkey and further democratic consolidation through increased trade, energy independence, a robust civil society, and fair and free elections.⁴⁰ Despite its laudable goals however, Obama's approach to Kosovo and the Balkans failed to realize substantive results, leaving Kosovo and Serbia no closer to mutual recognition.

³⁴ Michael Nelson, "Barack Obama: Foreign Affairs," University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/obama/foreign-affairs>.

³⁵ Nelson, "Barack Obama."

³⁶ Grgic, "The prospects of relative neglect."

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Barack Obama, "Statements by the President on the End of Kosovo's Supervised Independence," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, September 10, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/10/statement-president-end-kosovo-s-supervised-independence>.

³⁹ Grgic, "The prospects of relative neglect."

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Donald Trump

(2017-2021)



Donald Trump's victory against Hillary Clinton in 2016 can be explained at least partly through his foreign policy platform. But besides responding directly to the increasingly shared sentiment that the U.S. was over extended and its strategic and commercial alliances lop-sided, the Trump administration's foreign policy agenda was mostly idiosyncratic and unpredictable, emphasizing cheap political "wins" over substantive policy making and currying favor with other strongmen leaders. Trump's America First approach emphasized reducing trade deficits, rebalancing burden sharing in international partnerships, and hardening U.S. borders.⁴¹

Despite its apparent popularity with a significant portion of the American electorate, Trump's foreign policy scheme was less a strategic attempt at rebalancing America's commitments abroad than an attempt to reject or reverse the foreign policy initiatives undertaken by Obama. Examples abound including Trump pulling the U.S. out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, Paris Agreement, Trans-Pacific Partnership, United Nations Human Rights Council, and Iran Nuclear Deal.⁴² Similarly, Trump succeeded in eroding the trust underpinning historically crucial strategic partnerships, for example calling for the expansion of the Group of Seven to include Russia, questioning the efficacy and value of U.S. membership to NATO, and threatening U.S. withdrawal from the World Trade Organization.⁴³

As it relates to foreign policy towards Kosovo and the Balkans, Trump's approach appeared contrary to his America First doctrine, but a closer look reveals it was merely a last-ditch attempt to secure a political victory and bolster his remaining reelection hopes. Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia smoldered throughout Trump's term, and there certainly were traditional elements within the Trump administration State Department who regarded the Balkans as a strategically important region of competition between the U.S. and other world powers. But, unhappy with the pace and progress of engagement, he appointed a special envoy for peace negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo in 2019 to replace the Department of State's appointee, choosing U.S. ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell for the role.⁴⁴ After a year of negotiations, Prime Minister of Kosovo Avdullah Hoti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic met at the White House to sign two documents officially recognized as the Kosovo and Serbia Economic Normalization Agreements.⁴⁵ Among other provisions, the one-year agreements called for Serbia to cease its campaign against international recognition of Kosovo's independence, Kosovo to halt its application for membership to international organizations, and the normalization of military and trade relations between the countries.⁴⁶

The agreement might seem an example of U.S. foreign policy taking an active approach to Kosovo and succeeding in this effort, but it is problematic in several respects and unlikely to realize any fundamental change. Most importantly, the agreement is primarily economic and does not address the central issue underpinning the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, namely Serbia's continued rejection of

⁴¹ Jackie Calmes, "Donald Trump: Foreign Affairs," University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/trump/foreign-affairs>.

⁴² Zachary B. Wolf, "Here are all the treaties and agreements Trump has abandoned," CNN, February 1, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/01/politics/nuclear-treaty-trump/index.html>.

⁴³ Ankit Panda, "Trump Suggests a G7 Expansion to Include Australia, India, and South Korea. Is That Realistic?" The Diplomat, June 4, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/trump-suggests-a-g7-expansion-to-include-australia-india-and-south-korea-is-that-realistic/>; Mark Linscott, "The Trump administration's plan to upend the WTO," Atlantic Council, June 18, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/at-nato-summit-trump-abuses-americas-closest-friends/602959/>; <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-trump-administrations-plan-to-upend-the-wto/>.

⁴⁴ Judith Mischke, "Trump names Ric Grenell his special envoy for Serbia and Kosovo," POLITICO, October 4, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-names-ric-grenell-his-special-envoy-for-serbia-and-kosovo/>.

⁴⁵ Vivian Salama, "Serbia and Kosovo sign economic normalization agreement in Oval Office ceremony," CNN, September 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/04/politics/serbia-kosovo-agreement/index.html>.

⁴⁶ Salama, "Serbia and Kosovo sign economic normalization agreement."

Kosovo independence and the enduring tension between Albanians and Serbs living in Kosovo. Furthermore, the deal is slated to last one year, and it will be exceedingly difficult to achieve anything meaningful or permanent in such a short time. It is worth noting, however, that the agreement is not entirely inconsequential, and the fact that Trump, a source of amusement to many EU administrations, was able to secure a broad deal between Kosovo and Serbia puts pressure on his European counterparts to prove they can secure substantive accomplishments on this front, too.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Agon Maliqi, "And Now For Something Completely Different," Sbunker, September 9, 2020, <https://sbunker.net/rajoni-2020-bllogje-tematike/90624/and-now-for-something-completely-different/>.

Joe Biden

(2021-Present)



The 2020 U.S. presidential election signaled a widespread rejection of Trump's inward-looking foreign policy in favor of President Joe Biden's, which emphasized normalizing U.S. foreign policy relations with states abroad, rejoining international treaties and alliances, restoring America's standing on the world stage, and bolstering international institutions.⁴⁸ Biden's foreign policy and diplomatic experience prior to entering office was vast, and amongst his various campaign promises was a commitment to resetting U.S. foreign policy. Mindful of the mindset that made Trump's America First approach so appealing to the same working, middle class Americans who proved pivotal to his victory, Biden's approach attempts to fuse foreign and domestic policy by arguing that any actions taken abroad will directly impact Americans at home.⁴⁹ But many Biden critics argue that his foreign policy strategy is an "America First Lite," seeking to do the minimum abroad while focusing on crucial domestic concerns such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn it caused.⁵⁰ And a recent development suggests Biden may not be as committed to reestablishing EU alliances as he claimed in his presidential campaign; EU leaders accused Biden of disloyalty and a lack of transparency in his negotiation for a new Indo-Pacific strategic alliance with the United Kingdom and Australia to provide Australia with a fleet of nuclear submarines, effectively cancelling a massive contract between Australia and France for the sale of French submarines.⁵¹

As the contours of Biden's agenda become more defined, it is clear he wants to stake out a difficult position that ties domestic wellbeing to American action abroad, simultaneously seeking to meet the threat posed by an ambitious and economically powerful China, recommit to international alliances and agreements, emphasize environmental and human rights issues, and ensure the prosperity of all Americans through job creation and access to affordable healthcare.⁵²

In Kosovo and the Balkan region, Biden has the opportunity to repudiate Trump's trade-centric approach and make substantial, meaningful progress towards mutual recognition with Serbia, which is his administration's regional goal.⁵³ Not only did recent elections in Kosovo result in a shift of power to an administration eager to further democratic consolidation and eliminate corruption and outside authoritarian influences in Kosovo's politics, but Biden also has history in Kosovo that may facilitate unprecedented levels of cooperation and engagement.⁵⁴ President Biden visited Kosovo in 2016 to attend a ceremony honoring his late son, who had extensive experience as a legal adviser there, and Biden supported Kosovo independence while serving on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.⁵⁵ Furthermore, while a member of Congress Biden supported military intervention against Serbia in both the Bosnia and Kosovo Wars, and as Vice President he visited the region twice to advocate for rapprochement between Serbia and Kosovo.⁵⁶

While a permanent resolution appears unlikely in the immediate future, it is in both Biden's and the U.S.'s foreign policy interests to continue a campaign for mutual recognition between Serbia and

⁴⁸ Joe Biden, "The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century," Biden-Harris Campaign, <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>.

⁴⁹ Anita Kumar, "Biden's foreign policy: Reverse the Trump agenda but hit one similar note," POLITICO, June 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/07/biden-europe-trip-foreign-policy-492020>.

⁵⁰ Kumar, "Biden's foreign policy."

⁵¹ David M. Herszenhorn, "EU Leaders Accuse Biden of Disloyalty to Allies," POLITICO, September 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-charles-michel-biden-disloyalty-allies-aucus/>.

⁵² Kumar, "Biden's foreign policy."

⁵³ Orlando Crowcroft, "President Joe Biden says 'mutual recognition' key to Kosovo, Serbia talks," EuroNews, April 20, 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/20/president-joe-biden-says-mutual-recognition-key-to-kosovo-serbia-talks>.

⁵⁴ VOA News, "Vetevendosje Marks Landslide Victory in Kosovo's General Election," VOA, February 15, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/vetevendosje-marks-landslide-victory-kosovos-general-election>.

⁵⁵ Xhambazi, "Restoring America's Role."

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Kosovo. A focal point of U.S. foreign policy has long been challenging a zealous and aggressive China that is actively expanding its sphere of influence. This fact is evident in the Obama administration's efforts to increase U.S. economic activity in the region and solidify trade partnerships with countries historically dependent on China, an effort that was all the more urgent in light of China's 2013 belt and road initiative, an infrastructure development plan with the goal of investing in dozens of countries and international organizations.⁵⁷ Indeed, China's economy has grown exponentially, allowing it to increase its authority in places like Eastern Europe via foreign direct investment and debt creation. Similarly, China continues to expand its naval capacity and challenge the U.S. militarily in parts of the Pacific theater like the South China Sea, and it is locked in a bitter contest with U.S. cellular network providers to install 5G technologies around the world.⁵⁸

Other geopolitical adversaries like Russia envision an active role in the Balkans as well. In Serbia, which has long benefitted from Russian influence and support, Russian President Vladimir Putin has continually backed Serbian efforts to undermine Kosovo's independence and membership to international organizations, and it works to undermine NATO expansion in Europe generally.⁵⁹ Like China, Russia seeks to provide resources and services needed by any newly formed or developing country to establish an efficient and accountable government, prosperous economy, trade and security partnerships with neighbors, and a robust civil society capable of shaping the country's future. In this vein, an arena in which the US increasingly finds itself in conflict with other world powers is energy, and Russia has proven especially willing to weaponize energy to achieve political ends in the Balkan region. Kosovo is one of the few Balkan states remaining outside of NATO and, unless it can diversify its energy sources, Russia will continue to stipulate assistance on insulation from Western influence. The fact remains that unless the U.S. and its allies assume these responsibilities and establish themselves as the political and economic partner Kosovo and the Balkan region needs, another country with less than commendable motivations will instead.

Finally, enduring U.S. allies in Europe, such as Germany and France, are eager to play key economic and security roles in the Balkan region. Biden should work with these allies as an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone, making good on his campaign promise to support traditional European partners while simultaneously combatting Russian and Chinese influence in the Balkans.

Opponents of a foreign policy regime calling for an increased presence in Kosovo will likely invoke the same critique leveled against misguided involvement in other parts of the world, for example the Vietnam War, War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan, or bungled intervention attempts in Latin America. Several crucial differences suggest that features leading to past foreign policy blunders will not create similar problems for U.S. involvement in Kosovo. First, Kosovo does not require military aid or intervention. Despite the contested status of Kosovo's independence, it is not currently occupied by a foreign invader, at risk of invasion from a neighbor, or actively involved in any armed conflict. Second, Kosovo lacks ideological or religious characteristics that would counteract U.S. efforts to bolster democratic institutions or implement a transparent, accountable political body. In fact, Kosovo held successful elections this year in which a large portion of the population casted a ballot and during which the progressive, pro-democracy Vetevendosje party, or Self-Determination Movement, was lifted to power.⁶⁰ Finally, Kosovo is unique in that it is the most pro-American country in the world, home to the largest U.S. military base in the region, Camp Bondsteel, and would likely overwhelmingly support U.S. aid, intervention, and diplomatic efforts on its behalf.

⁵⁷ Jay Carey, "FACT SHEET: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, November 16, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>; <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁵⁸ Edith M. Lederer, "U.S. and China clash at UN over South China Sea disputes," Military Times, August 9, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2021/08/09/us-and-china-clash-at-un-over-south-china-sea-disputes/>; Nicol Turner Lee, "Navigating the US-China 5G Competition," Brookings, April 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/navigating-the-us-china-5g-competition/>.

⁵⁹ Louis Charbonneau, "An Independent Kosovo can never join U.N.: Russia."

⁶⁰ "Post-Election Analysis of February 14, 2021 Parliamentary Elections," National Democratic Institution, April 29, 2021, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/kosovo-post-election-analysis-february-2021-parliamentary-elections>.

Recommendations

U.S. foreign policy towards Kosovo and the Balkan region has been mixed and largely dependent on foreign policy commitments and priorities in other parts of the world. Previous presidential administrations from George H.W. Bush through Donald Trump relied on a mixture of diplomacy and military intervention to promote U.S. interests in the region, but no matter the form or function of various foreign policy schemes there has been the prevailing sentiment Europe is responsible for resolving its own issues. In light of increased involvement by countries with political models and values contrary to America's, the immense damage done by Trump to the U.S. as the archetype for a democratic, capitalist world order, Kosovo's exceptionally positive regard towards the U.S., and opportunities created by new leadership in Kosovo's government, President Biden must abandon the aforementioned attitude and recommit to our European partners. President Biden must:

1. Accelerate efforts to achieve mutual recognition between Serbia and Kosovo;
2. *further insulate Kosovo's politics from Serbian and Russian influence;*
3. continue the policy started under Obama and furthered by Trump to increase foreign *direct investment and develop Kosovo's economy; and*
4. remain committed to providing military aid either unilaterally or as part of a broader *coalition should Kosovo's sovereignty or security be threatened.*

There are myriad paths the Biden administration can pursue to facilitate achievement of the broad goals outlined above, and he can do so unilaterally through the American embassy and federal agency operations.

In terms of fighting corruption and furthering the consolidation of democratic institutions, which will improve Kosovo's prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration, the Biden administration should work with the U.S. Justice Department to insert officials in Kosovo's law enforcement apparatus, provide lawyers to assist in drafting new laws, and ensure the legal system is capable of enforcing its laws and holding accountable those individuals who violate them.⁶¹ Biden must also continue U.S. support for overhauling the Kosovo Security Force into a robust military apparatus, capable of protecting Kosovo's sovereignty consistent with NATO requirements of member states.

As it relates to securing mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia, Biden should use his vast international network and diplomatic corps to continue advocating on behalf of Kosovo's independence, recognition that is necessary for membership in important strategic alliances and economic partnerships. If countries prove reluctant to offer recognition, the Biden administration should look for opportunities to condition aid or fulfillment of treaty obligations on such recognition. Alternatively, Biden might reframe the discussion in terms of Kosovo's accession to important strategic alliances rather than in strict independence terms. Importantly, since the EU retains ultimate responsibility for Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, Biden must emphasize the U.S.'s historic and lasting support for the alliance, contextualize the lack of recognition of Kosovo's independence as a major impediment to continued U.S. cooperation, and provide unconditional, forceful support to any EU action taken in furtherance of Kosovo's international recognition.

Finally, Biden should develop Kosovo's economic capacity by increasing foreign direct investment and reducing the country's reliance on imports. The former can be achieved through a reduction of barriers to doing business in Kosovo, establishing a judiciary capable of resolving issues quickly and efficiently, and reducing corruption.⁶² The latter can be achieved through an emphasis on Kosovo's agricultural and energy sectors since both rely largely on international support.

⁶¹ Tracy Ann Jacobson and Martha Kepe, "U.S. Engagement in Kosovo," Georgetown University Press 15, no. 1 (2014): 159.

⁶² Jacobson and Kepe, "U.S. Engagement in Kosovo," 161-62.

These actions are a worthwhile pursuit. The focus of U.S. foreign policy has changed drastically since the days of the Cold War, pivoting from Europe to other strategic regions like the Middle East and Asia. But an active U.S. foreign policy in the Balkans, both in posture and substance, remains of paramount importance and is necessary to secure vital U.S. interests. Kosovo's success as a sovereign nation party to Euro-Atlantic membership and benefits, immune from foreign intermeddling, and increasingly self-sufficient is central to regional stability and may prove decisive in deterring Chinese and Russian influence. It will abate ethnic tensions and lead to greater socioeconomic and political opportunities for all individuals living within Kosovo's borders. It will provide a new frontier to U.S. companies for economic investment and development. And it will reestablish trust with European partners, whose confidence in the U.S. has worn dangerously thin. While engagement in places like the Middle East and Asia remain important, the interests at stake in Kosovo and the Balkans are too great to ignore.

Conclusion

The dangers the U.S. faces today are in a certain sense unlike those contemplated by political leaders decades ago, which usually featured traditional military engagements and hard power politics. But in many ways, they are the same, characterized by competing ideologies, outside efforts to influence domestic politics, and races to provide the socioeconomic and political needs of developing countries. Successful intervention or lack thereof continues to have drastic effects on the trajectory of young states, often determining whether a country falls into the American, Western-European fold or adopts a competing governmental model. Given the rise of authoritarian, populist politics around the world and the simultaneous degradation of America's role as a global leader thereof, the need for U.S. foreign policy to abandon its recent inward-looking tendencies and recommit to the rest of the world is great. Kosovo offers an important opportunity for the U.S. to realign its foreign policy, and any effort to take a resolute position in Kosovo will send a positive message to other international actors that the U.S. can be relied on to promote and protect democratic values beyond its borders. Furthermore, it will signal to powers with conflicting designs that any attempt to subvert democracy or prey on blossoming countries will be resisted. Biden must seize this opportunity, not only because the people of Kosovo deserve the opportunities for self-determination for which they have so long and fiercely fought, but also because such a decision will promote U.S. geopolitical and strategic interests and help reassert America as a global leader.

D4D Institute was established in April 2010 by a group of analysts who were increasingly worried that the state-building exercise had neglected democracy.

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