

## **American Hellenic Institute (AHI)**

### **“Washington’s Policy Towards FYROM and the Balkans: Institutionalizing Instability”**

#### **Doug Bandow Noon Forum**

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Why thank you, Nick. I appreciate that and Mr. Ambassador, Gene and other guests, it is certainly a pleasure for me to be here today and to talk about these important issues.

The question of foreign policy traditionally is not a major American political issue. Bill Clinton got elected by saying, “It is the economy, stupid.” And who cares if George H. W. Bush is a great world leader. We have to focus on domestic issues. Traditionally, that is what the Americans vote off.

But of course, today, foreign policy is all around us. And one of the problems is the issue of the Balkans, the issue of FYROM, issue of Kosovo, these other related issues are to some degree a backdrop in a world which everyone is focusing on other areas. It is Iraq, it is Iran, it is North Korea, it is China, it is Taiwan, it is Russia, it is a focus on a lot of different issues here which makes it much harder for policymakers to try and address these critical issues that are confronting us.

And I think what we will find and what this administration will find, of course, is it is going to have to address these issues. What we are looking at with the December 10<sup>th</sup> deadline in terms of Kosovo, we are looking in terms of FYROM, the question of FYROM’s entry into NATO, alliance negotiation issues, Greece’s position, NATO’s position, is that if these are going to be presented to this administration, it will not be able to escape.

It should have learned, but I’m not sure if it has, that dealing with these issues early is better than letting them go because when you let them go they become crises, while if you deal with them early, of course, hopefully you can reach a settlement. Unfortunately, we have not seen that and with both of these issues. If we throw on top of these the question of Cyprus which remains with us, the question of Turkey’s entry into the EU and the whole question of Kurdistan, the issues of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey’s threatened intervention, then we have multiple conflicting issues that are all related together in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Of course, the U.S. position on most of these issues, at least as I interpret it, is just to wish that they will go away. If only Greece would be nice and kind of accept Macedonia or the Republic of Macedonia or what-have-you, please do not bother us. If only the Serbs would be so nice as to accept an independent Kosovo, everything would be fine. We can all love one another and we can go back to the business of doing what we want to do here in Washington, which presumably is resolving Iraq or dealing with Iran or other things.

But of course, that is not going to happen. And the administration's desired position, while it might provide some superficial stability, in the long term would institutionalize instability on both of these issues. Of course, they come out of the end of the Cold War and the breakup of Yugoslavia.

The whole question, I think, and one of the problems here in Washington is that we really have to recognize that while America is a great country with many virtues, it typically does not treat its allies well. It views itself as a senior partner; it is not adept at listening to the concerns of smaller countries; and very often I think its view is that, "What have you done for us lately? You might have been a loyal ally during the Cold War but we have other concerns today, so why should we listen to you?"

As I interpret America's position on FYROM, it is essentially that, why are you bothering us about this issue? They understand that diplomatically they have to say something else. I mean, Nick Burns was recently indicating, yes, we recognize your concern and the sensitivity of this issue, and yada, yada. But at the end of the day, one can imagine the State Department with the view: "This is really something that we should not be bothered with. We have far more important things to do running the world than to worry about a name issue in the Balkans. Why on earth do we have to deal with this?"

Yet the fact is, of course, that Greece is a long time ally. The fact that this is an issue of great concern to Greece means it should be an issue to the United States. And especially if one is thinking about NATO expansion, what we have to recognize is that to the extent that an issue like this is a problem between a member and a potential member, and as a matter of some potential instability within that region, especially concerns of border changes and the question of territorial claims that might be made, that to bring FYROM into NATO with this claim, without this issue being resolved is going to bring all of those issues into NATO. The same thing, of course, with the EU. Now, the U.S. does not control EU affairs, but my perception of the EU's view of this is more or less the same. I mean, the recent comment by Javier Solana was, "I do not believe in vetoes," as in you, Greece, really should not think about using the veto on the FYROM if it wants to join the EU.

Roughly parallel to what Nick Burns said in terms of the U.S. believing these issues should be kind of consensus-driven and the name issue should not be the dominant one, et cetera, I interpret it kind of the same way: "Oh please, please do not use your veto here." But for both the EU and for NATO, one has to recognize that these are the worst kinds of issues to leave unresolved prior to bringing a country into a larger multinational institution. That whatever one thinks of it on its merits, the reality is this is a problem of the Balkans and one does not want that problem to suddenly become a problem in Brussels, whether it be EU or NATO. And the whole question about the border shifting and transfer of territories, one that we should recognize is a critical issue in the Balkans and it is one that reaches out throughout Eastern and Central Europe and it reaches in the Caucasus and the trans-Caucasus.

Now, these are issues that matter quite a bit and in terms of FYROM, of course, it is not only Greece- Bulgaria could have some concerns as well. The question about what Macedonia

is and if indeed the Republic of Macedonia wanted more territory, one can imagine where it might go.

So these are issues which clearly should be resolved prior to bringing FYROM into NATO if that is desired. I'm not so convinced that FYROM is an obvious candidate for NATO, do we want to expand NATO, how far, how fast, to what kind of countries, and what kind of security commitments does America want to bring on? All of these are issues that deserve serious debate separate from the name issue.

America has to recognize it is bringing on countries that provide essentially security deficits, not benefits; that is, the United States is promising to defend nations which themselves bring very little militarily or politically to the alliance. So this is an issue that deserves serious debate in any case and it certainly requires serious debate at a time when FYROM has not resolved these issues in negotiations with Greece.

The FYROM name issue is a very important symbolic one. The Kosovo question presents us with kind of critical issue of territory right now. Now the issue of FYROM's name is one of which one is concerned about potential border changes at some future point. The issue of Kosovo, Albania, and breaking up Serbia, present that question to us right now. And these are obviously critically important issues.

Again, this is an issue that ultimately grows out of the end of the Cold War, the breakup of Yugoslavia. But, of course, it has an added element. At least FYROM was a constituent republic of the country of Yugoslavia and was viewed in some sense as being appropriate for nationhood. Kosovo is a part of Serbia; that is, it is a part of a constituent part of Yugoslavia. So when we are reaching down one step further of breaking up what in the other case we decided was a country.

All of you know the premature recognition of Croatia and Slovenia before there was any serious negotiation over minority rights. But I never understood the perspective that says that it is okay to have Croatia declare that we want out of the Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, but we do not have to make any concessions to ethnic minorities within our own boundaries. We have the right to be an independent country, but those within should trust us. Franjo Judjman, heroic defender of the people will protect the Serb minority.

This issue was guaranteed to lead to conflict because no one sitting in Berlin and in Washington could imagine that a scenario like that would work out well. If we look at the whole breakup, the serial breakup of Yugoslavia and the position of the West, as far as I can tell the only consistency was the Serbs always lose.

Now, maybe that is the position that the U.S. would want to take, but Washington should certainly recognize that it is the position it was taking. One cannot look at that and say that you can of course secede from Serb-dominated units whatever those are, but no Serb minority can do the same. No Serb minority in any case has a right to secede from anywhere else. So everyone can say we do not want to be under a Serb-dominated political entity, but no

Serb was entitled in any case to say we do not want to be under a Croatian or Bosnian or Albanian dominated political unit.

That remains the case today with Kosovo. The problem that we face today is this presumption after American intervention and NATO intervention, the bombing campaign, the occupation. Throughout, the presumption has always been despite the UN resolutions, that at the end of the day we are going to have an independent Kosovo.

I do not know how anyone could have gone into that conflict and assume that if you throw the Serbs out, essentially destroy their authority over the province, that one could ever go back to a situation in which it was a full fledged part of Serbia in the future. There could still have been effective negotiations over Kosovo's future, but not so long as the ethnic Albanians could assume that, at the end of the day the guarantee was independence. We could argue about conditionality and throw in some other discussions here and there. But the reality was at the end the day, the assumption of the West was we would give them independence. They had no reason to negotiate with the Serbs and over much of anything with the Serbs. What I found striking, of course, is that while negotiations were going on, there was always criticism of the Serbs for not being flexible because they wanted to maintain some authority over the territory. I never saw any criticism of the Albanians for not being flexible enough in coming up with something other than full independence.

And the problem was -- they understood that. It was the same at the latest negotiations this year; the same posture was taken towards Kosovo. Expectations were created and now, of course, the West has really set itself up. That the EU and the U.S., by presuming independence, created expectations within Kosovo of independence. Then they realized last year that neither Serbia nor Russia were willing to go along with the plan. I mean, the plan was that you promised the Serbs EU membership and they would be willing to give up part of the territory, and the Russians would be compliant and go along with it because you want them to, and the allies found out on both scores suddenly that did not work. And now we have a new deadline on December 10<sup>th</sup> where the ongoing negotiations, such as they are, will be ending and a promise by who we presume will be the new prime minister of Kosovo to declare independence forthwith after the end of those negotiations.

The question then, of course, is what happens after a unilateral declaration of independence in Europe? Things could get quite interesting quite fast- who recognizes them, what happens to the Serb minority, if the Serbs in Mitrovica declared their own independence or declared their allegiance to Serbia, what do the allies do? What do the Albanians do? All of these things suddenly could become very messy, very ugly, very quickly.

And again, that just shows the problem from Washington's standpoint to believe that if you simply get independence and shove Kosovo into the European Union, that you somehow solve the problem. But, no, that would simply bring the instability up to another level. Without resolving the concern of neighbors of Kosovo, most obviously Serbia which, of course, is losing the territory, but also Greece and, frankly in a case like this, FYROM is not terribly enthused about the notion of an independent Albania and the question of what ethnic Albanians might want and what country they might want to be in. There could be some rather

significant consequences as well for the rest of Serbia, the question of Southern Serbia. These are issues which have a regional impact, and yet certainly the United States and at least some of the EU countries have not been very concerned about that regional impact.

So in both of these cases, I think the U.S. has been very short sighted in its policy. And in an attempt to come up with a superficially obvious and simple answer, Washington merely raises the issue of instability to another level and it creates problems that are potentially much greater than what we have today. So what the U.S. needs to do in both of these cases is to step back from the kind of presentation of “here is the answer” to an expectation of genuine negotiations among the parties to resolve issues, where there is no obvious and predetermined outcome. That rather than setting up the presumption that Greece will accept FYROM or setting up the presumption that Serbia and Russia will accept Kosovo, to say “We do not have an obvious answer in any of these, and indeed America is rather a long way away from these problems,” but these are issues which need to be resolved by countries around that have the most stake.

Europe I would hope could make the same kind of decisions. Indeed Europe has an awful lot more at stake because instability in the Balkans much more directly affects Western and Central and Eastern Europe. And certainly if one thinks about the potential of Kosovo and if there is conflict there, what that means in terms of refugees, in terms of European forces, I mean the Germans, for example, are very nervous. They are quite willing to provide troops that are under a UN mandate, well, what if there is independence? What if there no UN mandate for that? Suddenly there are legal and political issues at home, and this process is going to be replicated throughout Europe.

So Europe needs to step back as well. Is Europe really willing to accept a unilateral declaration of independence in Kosovo, and are there individual countries that are willing to move ahead of others? Imagine what this could set off in terms of conflict within the territory, disagreements within Europe itself, what America’s position would be. But what the U.S. or Washington would suddenly find I think is potentially a crisis in the Balkans at a time where its hands are rather full.

The U.S. remains concerned about Iraq and it is good the violence is down, but let’s recognize what that means: violence is down to the levels at the beginning of last year. It is not down to the levels that any of us would find acceptable in our own society. What we have managed to do is move back behind that horrendous kind of sectarian flare up. We certainly have not solved the problem. The whole question about cooperation with Russia, questions about Iran, whether North Korea follows through the nuclear negotiations, all of these things fill Washington’s plate. The U.S. certainly does not need another crisis in the Balkans, especially one which conceivably could have military implications.

I also would encourage the neighbors of Kosovo, the neighbors of FYROM, particularly Greece, but others are involved, of course, in varying degrees depending on the issues. Serbia and Bulgaria, Russia, Italy, and others have qualms about some of these border changing questions, tearing up borders and transferring populations and authorities. They need to be very assertive both to the United States and within the EU.

I think it was 1988 when I was visiting Greece and the issue of Kosovo was looming, and I found officials very concerned about the potential of NATO intervention. And I said, "Why do you not say no?" I mean, the process is normally consensus-oriented. We know how it typically works, but just stand up and say, "No!" and that should be rather significant to hear because the U.S. was just rushing ahead to start a bombing campaign. And I was told, "Oh no, we cannot possibly do that." And my reaction is this is the time to act. That whether NATO's expansion to FYROM, whether the question of recognition of Kosovo, these sorts of issues require countries that have a lot at stake to be very vocal. Because what we have seen over the last decade is that those concerns typically do not receive significant attention, either in Washington or in Brussels. And to my mind, what friends and allies do with a country like the United States is that they act like friends and they tell it when it is wrong. And I do not find that offensive; I do not find that problematic. As an American, I would like to have other countries tell my government it is making a mistake because it clearly does make mistakes and those mistakes are costly for the United States as well as countries in the region. So I would certainly encourage other governments, other peoples, those with concerns in the region to be very explicit in what their concerns are over both of these policies.

In the end, I would say stability is an important good, but not the only good. There are a lot of other issues that go into foreign policy. Nevertheless, when one is thinking about a region that has been racked by war, that has had lots of refugees and it has had killing, it has a history in terms of border changes and population transfers and ethnic cleansing and everything else, this is a region where, certainly, stability matters.

And American policy, at the very least, should put a pretty strong value on stability. But that stability is something that has to be long term as well as short term. One can not simply say would it not be nice in December to have the Kosovo issue solved and make them independent; we are done. That is not the case. The question of FYROM is not simply, bring FYROM into NATO and everyone will be happy. They will not. Those are issues where stability requires a settlement of a conflict, a settlement of the disputes by negotiated process before bringing those issues up into higher levels of government organizations and institutions.

In that I would like to see the United States change its policy, but I also think it is critical for America's friends to be very explicit and very pronounced in their comments to Washington and to Brussels about how these issues should be resolved and how important it is for the concerns of other countries, smaller countries, nevertheless important countries to be taken into account in resolving them.

And I thank you very much and I'm happy to take any questions.