After 13 years of autocratic rule, the people of Yugoslavia elected a new head of state. How will the U.S. election affect Kosovo where there are some 7,000 U.S. soldiers?

Under President Slobodan Milosevic, there was an intense effort to create a greater Serbia, and the province of Kosovo was center stage. Milosevic used the Yugoslav Army and National Police to drive ethnic Albanians out of Kosovo. His ruthless tactics in 1998 and 1999 led to intense but failing diplomatic efforts, a bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, and occupation of Kosovo by NATO forces. Prior to Milosevic’s fall from power, NATO had over 35,000 troops still in the province with the Yugoslav Army and National Police across the border. This, coupled with the equally intense desire of Kosovar-Albanians to create an independent country free of Serbians, means Kosovo is still a volatile and dangerous area.

From Milosevic to Kostunica
Under President Kostunica, the fate of Kosovo is still very much undecided. There are two main issues: the final status of the province – an autonomous region of Yugoslavia or an independent nation, and secondly, whether the region will become an integrated or an ethnically separate society. This will depend on the new Yugoslav President, the new U.S. President, and of greatest importance, the Kosovar-Albanians.

Though not prone to military action like his predecessor, President Kostunica is a Serb nationalist. His underlying interest will be for a greater Serbia. If he allowed Kosovo to become an independent country as the Kosovar-Albanians want, he could very well lose political support and ultimately his presidency. Kosovo is considered the heart of Serbia; some even see it as the Holy Land of Serb nationalism. Aware of the desire of NATO to make Kosovo an autonomous province of Yugoslavia, Kostunica will probably wait out the nation building effort in Kosovo. For him, it makes sense to let the United Nations with the support of the European Community continue to rebuild Kosovo.

The U.S. Factor
For the United States, involvement in Kosovo appears to be tied closely to who wins in the upcoming presidential election. Governor George W. Bush argues that the U.S. military should not undertake nation building activities while Vice President Al Gore argues that nation building is an appropriate mission for the military in this new world order. Regardless of who is elected, it is not likely that the United States will pull out of Kosovo, even with Congress threatening to withhold funding. Ultimately, Bush will discover that U.S. involvement in Kosovo is directly tied to vital U.S. interests -- maintaining the NATO alliance, for example. Gore, if he becomes the Commander in Chief, will better understand the challenges facing the U.S. military and not increase U.S. involvement. The bottom line, regardless of the outcome of the election, is that U.S. policies toward Kosovo will change little.

The wild card is the Kosovar-Albanians. They will seek an opportunity to settle one of the major issues not settled in the aftermath of the 78 day bombing campaign -- complete independence. As more and more nations welcome the change of leadership in Belgrade, Kosovar-Albanians see their dream of independence fading. All the while, ethnic tensions remain very high. Although there has not been a marked increase of violence toward Serbs since the Yugoslav election, attacks against Serbs are far too frequent and appear to be part of an organized effort to rid Kosovo of Serbs. Thus more Serbs leave Kosovo every day. Ethnic cleansing continues in this reverse mode right under the noses of the NATO peacekeepers.
The future of Kosovo, therefore, lies, as it always did, with its people. It is unlikely that the Serbs and Albanians will learn to live side by side. The issue of independence must be addressed. The international community cannot continue to sit on the fence. The United States must take the lead because no other nation will. While the international community attempts to find a solution, peacekeepers must keep the violence of Albanians against Serbs to a minimum. The answer for either a Gore or a Bush Administration will be nation building, to get U.S. troops home more quickly. Solving the issue on the future status of Kosovo will accomplish both. In weighing all the factors, and there are many, the answer should be independence for Kosovo. With the changing of the guards, the time is right to begin this dialogue and forever bring peace to this troubled region.

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