

US Policy in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean: Time to Stop Choosing Sides, and to Start Choosing Strategic Interests

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A nation's foreign and strategic policies exist solely to protect and further the nation's interests, sovereignty, and security. The furtherance of these interests often necessitates compromise, collaboration, and patience, but the ultimate goal remains constant. Too often, in all countries, however, the *process* and *structural continuity* of the foreign and strategic policy tools are given greater priority and weight than the fundamental goal. As with all aspects of the ageing process, fear of change takes precedence over the furtherance of survival goals. Arteries calcify and become brittle, and an aloof manner indicates not strength and calmness but the fact that rigidity has replaced perceptiveness.

There is a saying that insanity is defined by continuing to repeat the same processes and expecting different outcomes. To a large extent, that is what we get when we give greater priority to the *process* than to the *purpose* of our foreign and strategic policy tools.

It is in this context that we can say that US policy toward the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean regions is not based on realistic, current, and balanced assessments of US strategic interests, nor even on a balanced and realistic accretion of historic friendships, treaty obligations, or past interests. That is not to say that the matter of interests, treaties, and historic friendships play no part in current US policy in this critical area of the world, but rather these key factors now play only a secondary rôle in how the US operates in the region.

But added to the problem of systemic sclerosis, it is also true that nations accustomed to the safety which their strategic power gives them feel that they can afford not to look too

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seriously into the consequences of their international activities and policies. Miles Copeland, the author of *The Game of Nations*, and a seasoned Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East hand, once made the comment that US foreign policy was merely US domestic politics carried out abroad. Not US domestic policy carried out abroad: domestic *politics*.

Certainly there was the logic of US national interests behind the early development of US strategic policies toward the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean: the need to ensure US access to oil; the need to contain the USSR, the principal strategic rival of the US and the West; the need to bolster NATO — the principal alliance structure for US and Western defenses — and to safeguard US and related transit and trade routes through the Mediterranean and Suez Canal; and so on. All of these vital interests (and other subsidiary interests) were enabled through the development of treaty and alliance structures designed specifically to achieve the natural goals of a sovereign state operating as a global power.

In the Cold War, the continued strength of NATO's southern flank was of paramount importance in the containment of Soviet military capability. The US commitment to Greece and Turkey was key in this, as was the US commitment to Iran. Indeed, by whimsically abandoning support for the Shah of Iran, then-President Jimmy Carter gave a fillip to Soviet survival, and enabled the Cold War to last longer than it possibly would have.

But since the end of the Cold War in 1990, the US has experienced nothing in this region which could *directly and immediately* jeopardize the survival of the United States as an entity. It has experienced only side-shows; enough to give it sufficient pause to re-evaluate only tactically and transitorily some aspects of its policy. As a result, changes in strategic realities — particularly with the end of the Cold War and the resultant break-up of the USSR and Yugoslavia — have been dealt with by adding patches to a US strategic policy which was formulated to meet an entirely different set of circumstances. Even the attempt to bend the old NATO structure to the fluid and asymmetric threats which emerged in the 1990s and later was like a farmer attempting to use his tractor in the vegetable patch of his retirement home. Just because they exist, we tend to use the wrong tools for the job at hand.

By dealing on an *ad hoc* basis with narrow interests within the region, and dealing with these interests in isolation and with the wrong tools, the ramifications of the patchwork accretion of actions, dictums, and expediencies have been allowed to build into a grotesque distortion, which has achieved a life of its own. Policies which should have been reviewed a decade ago have continued to develop unrealistically. Policies which were implemented for domestic US reasons have been allowed to continue simply because no-one knows how to stop them. US allies in the region try to read US desires and intentions on the basis of logic, but the logic most often escapes them.

Clearly, the entire Balkans, Caucasus, Black Sea, and Mashreq² strategic situations — not to mention the realities of the European Union states, the aspirations of Russia, Iran, Ukraine, Georgia, and so on — have changed beyond recognition merely in the past decade. If this was a purely business environment, it would have been logical to undertake a clean-sheet re-evaluation of the situation, and to draft a new grand strategy for the region. But that has not occurred. New grand strategic movements have occurred by default, but they have not been fully, and contextually, thought through, at least in Washington, where historic interest groups — whether Arabist in nature, or pro-Israel, or pro-Turkey, or anti-Russian, or anti-European, or pro-European, or pro-energy — have each fought passionately to retain or improve their position.

As a result, US policy today is based entirely on how well these respective groups have been able to build and protect their interests. And if US policy, as it is implemented on the ground in the contiguous and interrelated region of the Middle East, Balkans, and Eastern Mediterranean is misshapen, it is merely a reflection of what is happening in Washington. There, the battles rage between both vested interests, and vested ignorances.

The thought of a “clean sheet” re-evaluation of US policy clearly frightens bureaucrats in Washington as well as US friends and enemies alike in the region. It is not something which can be done easily. Nor can US policies, and entrenched interests or structures be “put on hold” while such a re-evaluation is undertaken. An hiatus or sudden implantation of a totally new policy would be tantamount to a revolution, and revolutions causes chaos and unpredictable results. Rather, this over-arching reassessment needs to be undertaken comprehensively across all levels of the Administration and Congress so that the underlying essentials can be identified and gradually strengthened, and the outworn or distorted aspects reduced and eliminated.

Obviously, to get to such a situation implies that the various cultures of the State Department, the Defense Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency would all be able to agree on what US interests, obligations, and desires are for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans (as well as for other areas of the world). Herein lies the problem. The cultures of the State Department, Defense Department, and CIA, are so different that even when they can agree on what constitute US interests, they cannot agree on implementation, and each propose their own skill-sets as the most vital to achieve the goals. If they have succeeded in anything, then it has been in preventing “short-timers”, the elected and appointed officials (who are the only ones to hold the public’s proxy and mandate), from making profound policy initiatives.

In 2003, I published a report, and made a number of speeches, which said specifically that the US was withdrawing its extensive military force structure from Western Europe — principally Germany and Italy — and that these forces would not return to those old Cold War bases. My report was immediately attacked, vilified, and ridiculed by a number of US ambassadors in Eastern Europe, and yet within weeks the US Defense Department

² Cyprus, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian Authority, and Syria.

was making it clear that the report was absolutely correct. And history has vindicated that reporting.³

Apart from the end of the Cold War itself, this was the most fundamental change in US strategic projection in 50 years, and yet the State Department appeared to believe that it was not happening. They appeared as King Canute, attempting to hold back the tide.

We now have the situation of the sudden decision, announced on November 4, 2004, by the United States Government to recognize a change of name in what had become known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to merely "the Republic of Macedonia". I don't particularly have a problem with that. Both Greece and the former Yugoslav republic can make their respective arguments, although only Greece can claim the lineage which the ancient Macedonian conquest of the Hellenistic city-states created. By conquering the city-states, Philip of Macedon, and his son, Alexander, assumed the mantle of Hellenism, and conquered and spread culture in its name. But the fact of US recognition of the name change is interesting because of *why* it was done, and how it highlights US Government decisionmaking on the region.

Let us forget, for a moment, that the US decision was taken abruptly and that it offended Greece, the country which is, essentially, now the most significant strategic partner of the US in South-Eastern Europe. [I say this because Turkey has for some years become a questionable and unreliable ally of the US and Europe, partly because of corruption, but partly also because the Turks have recognized correctly that the Cold War is over, and that they have other interests to protect, and only some of these interests coincide with the interests of the US and the West.]

But putting that aside for the moment, the *real* rationale for the US policy change regarding the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia was the fact that US military and intelligence facilities in Albania were being sabotaged and attacked, and this was

³ See *Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily*, May 2, 2003: *The New US and the New Europe: The US Prepares Move of German-based Forces to Serbia-Montenegro, Bulgaria and Romania*, and *Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily*, June 30, 2003: *US State Dept., CIA War Against Pentagon Breaks Into the Open With Profound Impact on Strategic Policy*. As well, see for example, *Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily*, June 13, 2003: *US Interests in the Balkans: Balancing Perceptions, Realities and Strategic Need*. That report noted:

Despite statements by the US State Department, the US will do what the Defense Department is advocating. It will move most of the US forces out of Germany. Most, indeed, are already deployed out of the region, in Iraq, for example. Those forces which return to Europe will start to utilize basing in South-Eastern Europe. Romania and Bulgaria have been mentioned as most likely to be the alliance partners of choice, because they have access to an area long denied to the US: the Black Sea. Consideration has been given to Serbia-Montenegro, as well, because history has determined that Belgrade, for example, remains a critical cross-road of trade in the region and its influence on the Danube artery is vital. Albania, too, must be considered by the US, because of its access to the Mediterranean.

All of this will occur over time, and not as a single, sudden move. Indeed, it is necessary to buffer the changes so that they do not also have a negative impact on the economy of Germany, which benefits enormously from the US investment. And the US cannot afford to allow the creation of a Berlin-centric European Union which could emerge as a hostile and destabilizing force, opposing the US. It would be foolhardy for the US to encourage such a development.

threatening the continuity of logistical and other support to US forces in the Serbian province of Kosovo. As a result, the US needed to quickly move its assets out of Albania — a fact which has yet to be acknowledged or explained — and to relocate them in Macedonia. Cooperation by Skopje was fast and effective, and the trade-off regarding the recognition of the name “Republic of Macedonia” was made, by the US Government, on the basis of simple expedience. No real thought was given to the consequences, or to the real questions which this decision raised.

Certainly, the State Department would have advised the White House that the change in name recognition would create a backlash from Greece, and from Greek-American voters in the US. The decision to proceed with the trade-off with Skopje would have been taken because the backlash would have been considered to have been manageable. After all, where is Greece going to go, strategically? Greece needs its alliance with the US to help counterbalance Turkey, among other things.

But what the underlying cause of the decision — that is, the attacks on, and insecurity of the US facilities in Albania — means is that the Albanian security situation reflects the volatility of the clan-based rivalries and the related narco-trafficking and criminal activities which are linked with global terrorism. But by admitting this as the basis for the need to move facilities out of Albania, the US would then have to admit that this terrorism-related criminal activity, and particularly narco-trafficking, is intrinsically linked into the *al-Qaida* and Iranian-backed terrorist infrastructure of the region, and into the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which now, under new names, controls the Serbian province of Kosovo.

Significantly, part of the trade-off which Washington made with Skopje was that Skopje backed-off from its vociferous claims about the ethnic-Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) which has been attempting to break up the former Yugoslav area of Macedonia. The NLA is a re-emerged part of the KLA; it is linked with *al-Qaida*, and with the Iranian terrorist infrastructure in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Raška in Southern Serbia, and in Serbia’s Kosovo area.

The irony of this begins to emerge. The US rewards Skopje for stopping expressions of concern about Albanian terrorism which is also the cause of the US having to move its assets out of Albania itself. Why is this? Because no-one in the State Department or Defense Department is willing to admit that US support for this terrorist and narco-trafficking base of Albanians in 1999 — when the US led NATO into attacks on Serbia in order to assist the KLA — was wrong. This is part of the distortion of US foreign and strategic policy: no-one will admit that they made a mistake.

There are many Congressmen on Capitol Hill who understand that this distortion exists with regard to Balkan policy. But equally, there are politicians in both major parties who supported the KLA during the 1990s, so that today it is impossible for a Republican-controlled Bush White House and Congress to attack the logic and merit of the 1999 war, waged against Serbia by the then-Democratic Party-controlled Clinton White House. It is difficult for the White House, for example, to criticize the 1990s support by the Clinton

Administration for the *al-Qaida*-linked KLA without also opening up to criticism some senior members of the Republican Party.

There is ample evidence to support this analysis, but I raise it only as a reflection of the symptoms of the failure to objectively re-evaluate US policy toward the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Again, it may be possible to say that, despite its disingenuous nature and its potential to upset regional allies, such US policy distortion does not seriously threaten vital US interests. In other words, to say: yes, this is a problem, but not a major problem.

I would argue that this is a grave avoidance of reality. US policy failures in the Balkans and the failure to realistically re-evaluate US-Turkish relations threaten several things:

Firstly, long-term planning by the Defense Department to move its primary European basing and power projection capabilities from Western Europe to South-Eastern Europe is thrown into jeopardy by the potential for renewed war over Kosovo, in Macedonia, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Secondly, it renders meaningless the war on terrorism if its real core and linkages cannot be acknowledged and attacked. The State and Defense departments, and the CIA, have been constantly warned about the narco-trafficking and terrorism links in the Balkans, but have swept this aside. The State Department, despite having been presented with concrete intelligence about the activities of narco-traffickers and terrorists in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in southern Serbia, Macedonia, and the like, has, nonetheless decided to say that there is no terrorism activity related to these areas.

Thirdly, by failing to acknowledge the changed strategic contextual realities and the changes and cracks within the Turkish system, the US reliance on Turkey, and its support for Turkey, become meaningless, and have damaging regional effects, including sustaining the logistical framework of the Islamist terrorist movements, even those which are against Turkey's own long-term interests. There has been strong Turkish involvement in supporting Balkan narco-traffickers and terrorist groups, perhaps unofficially, but certainly with considerable effect.

There has been no re-evaluation despite all of this, and despite the proven links between Bosnian terrorism cells and the 9/11 attackers and even to the Madrid bombers.

It would be a mistake to think that this problem will go away, or that the war on terrorism has successfully moved the tide against the terrorism and narco-trafficking infrastructure in the Balkans. The fact that the US has been forced to remove its assets from Albania, despite the quiet manner in which this has been undertaken, is just one indication of the ongoing degradation of the situation there. And yet the US still refuses to acknowledge that this is integrally linked with the Albanian-based terrorism underway in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, or that it is at the very heart of the creation of what is already a criminal sub-state in Kosovo, which is directly under the control of the KLA.

The fact that the KLA leader and, until March 8, 2005, Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush (Hilmi) Haradinaj, was indicted for war crimes and taken to The Hague for trial still has not penetrated the consciousness of what is transpiring. Moreover, in order to somewhat ease the embarrassment of having backed the wrong side — the side of *al-Qaida*, the narco-traffickers, the true genocidal xenophobists, and the criminal gangs — in Kosovo, the US is in some ways actively working to let Mr Haradinaj out of prison, so that he can “fight his legal battle from a position of freedom”. This is a man charged with having directly and personally killed many innocent people, not a politician who allegedly allowed things to happen by default. The scandal of this particular case has yet to break, but suffice it to say that Albanian mafia linked to the KLA have worked through former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke — a close associate of the KLA and a beneficiary of its support — to approach the US President of the International Criminal Tribunal on the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Theodore Meron, to see Haradinaj released.⁴ There are reports from within the ICTY that the State Department would approve the release of Haradinaj, and had, in fact, agreed with Haradinaj in advance of his surrender to the ICTY, that a deal would be struck to ensure that he did not serve prison time for the charges he faced.

These are not the only issues where the US has, because of the distorted development of its Eastern Mediterranean and Balkan policies, been drawn into patterns which have been damaging to US long-term interests. The coddling of Turkey over the question of Cyprus, for example, produced disastrous results, which US policymakers in 2004 attempted to lay unfairly at the feet of the Cypriot voters. The result was a disaster for the US, for all Cypriots, and for the long-term interests of Turkey and Europe. It was only saved from a worse disaster by the first fully-sovereign exercise of their powers by Cypriot voters, who overwhelmingly rejected the plan so roundly endorsed by the US.

As well, the US State Department’s unilateral policy, just introduced, of refusing visas to the elected officials of the ruling party of Republica Srpska, the Bosnian Serb republic within Bosnia-Herzegovina, also is a result of distorted policy thinking, and smacks of an attempt to stop these officials from communicating with Congress. Already, officials of this Bosnian Serb Government have been critical in helping the US and the West in the war on terrorism, but there are, as I noted earlier, officials within the US who wish to disguise the fact that, during the Clinton Administration, they backed the side of the terrorists, not the side of the victims.

So in order to refuse to correct mistakes, or even acknowledge them, there are many officials within the US bureaucracy who have allowed themselves to be drawn into what has become almost a circus of foreign policy juggling which — even by the kindest interpretation — fails to help the US, the region in question, or the cause of US ethical leadership and credibility. This will result in more war, more instability, more narcotics on European and US streets, more instability in South-Eastern Europe and the Eastern

⁴ Meron, a professor of law at New York University, was a member of the US official delegation to the Rome talks in 1998, at which the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) was discussed. At that conference, he reflected the US line, which was in complete opposition to the foundation of the ICC, but subsequently accepted to be President of the ICC’s subsidiary court, the ICTY.

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Mediterranean. And ultimately it will cost the US the respect and loyalty of those allies it has in the region and elsewhere.

But clearly that's more important than admitting that mistakes were made, and need correction.