



Opening Statement
Hearing on "Kosovo: A Way Forward?"
Tuesday, November 8, 2005, 9:30 AM

Mr. Chairman, thank you for convening a hearing on this timely and important topic. I also want to welcome our witnesses, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns and former Ambassador Dick Holbrooke, who played such a significant role in ending the carnage in Bosnia. Both the United States and the people of Southeast Europe are better off as a result of your efforts in the region and I appreciate your willingness to testify today.

Mr. Chairman, in 1999, the United States led NATO forces in a military campaign to protect the people of Kosovo from the pathological belligerence of Slobodan Milosevic. During the six years since that conflict ended, the United States and other countries have devoted billions of dollars and millions of man hours to the pursuit of progress in Kosovo. On a personal note, I should mention that my oldest son, Beau, while at the Department of Justice, spent almost a year in Kosovo helping to rebuild the province's shattered legal system.

The international community's extraordinary investment in Kosovo has few historic parallels.

Fortunately, it has produced important dividends. In marked contrast to the chaos of 1999, Kosovo's institutions are more capable today. The province's citizens have participated in several free and fair elections. And, with the tragic exception of last year's March riots, Kosovo has been largely free of inter-ethnic violence.

These accomplishments should be recognized, but they cannot mask the reality that the current situation in the province is fundamentally unworkable.

Kosovo's economy remains a hostage of the province's undefined legal status. Until the status issue is resolved, Kosovars legally cannot receive assistance from international financial bodies such as the World Bank and they will not receive needed foreign investment.

Ethnic Albanians feel – with some justification – that the international community has been kicking the can down the road on the status issue. They’ve spent too long struggling to build a society on a foundation of uncertainty. They need and deserve a decision.

Earlier this year, Undersecretary Burns said that the status quo in Kosovo is neither sustainable nor desirable, a statement with which I agree. Personally, I think both the political and economic situation need an extreme makeover. I believe some form of independence for Kosovo is the only solution that will allow citizens of both Kosovo and Serbia to realize a future of stability and modernity.

The political process designed to resolve Kosovo’s status is underway. But, in an attempt not to “prejudge” the outcome of the talks, U.S. officials and many other interested countries have skirted key issues.

Mr. Chairman, I worry that in doing so, we will feed the very instability we are trying to avoid. Trouble in the Balkans is almost always the product of false expectations.

Few cases have demonstrated this phenomenon more vividly than Slobodan Milosovic’s misguided assumption that NATO would not act decisively to protect the people of Kosovo from his aggression.

Kosovars have spent too many years stuck in political limbo as a result of that miscalculation. It’s time for politicians and diplomats to start leveling with the citizens of the region.

Finding a solution in Kosovo is going to require tough compromises on all sides. Unfortunately, few leaders are proving courageous enough to prepare their people for what lies ahead. To the extent that we fail to spell out the hard facts, we risk becoming accomplices in this dereliction of duty.

The people of Serbia and Montenegro must recognize that holding on to Kosovo would be an act of willful sabotage against the future of their country. Generations of Serbs stand to reap enormous benefits from the closer ties to NATO and the European Union that will be possible once Serb war criminals are in The Hague, and Kosovo no longer serves as a drag parachute on the future of Serbia.

In stark contrast, Serbia will find a future of frustration and isolation if it persists in clinging to the territorial artifacts of a bloody past. Serbia does not have the political stature or practical ability to govern Kosovo. It’s time for Serb leaders to publicly acknowledge that reality and stop obstructing progress in Kosovo. Once that happens, it will be easier to address Belgrade’s legitimate interests, such as the protection of Serb heritage sites and minority populations.

At the same time, the people of Kosovo must understand that a successful outcome to the negotiation process will be impossible unless they and their leadership display substantial flexibility, restraint, and maturity.

Unfortunately, many Kosovar Albanians have come to believe that “negotiation” is a four-lettered word. They are wrong. Independence for Kosovo – when it comes – will occur because of Kosovars’ willingness to seek compromise, not in spite of it.

As a community that spent years as an oppressed minority, Kosovars should be doubly receptive to the concerns of their own minorities. Serb cultural ties to the area and concerns over the safety of Kosovo’s Serb population are not legitimate grounds for governing Kosovo from Belgrade. But these concerns must be recognized and respected by all of Kosovo’s citizens.

Lastly, Kosovo’s large international community should be working overtime to make sure that the Kosovo which emerges from status talks in the best possible shape. That’s going to take a lot of effort. The economy is stagnant, organized crime and corruption are rampant, and the Serb and Albanian communities remain largely estranged.

These issues won’t be resolved before Kosovo’s status is decided. But UNMIK and relevant NGOs need to use every ounce of capacity they have now in order to ameliorate these problems before there is an agreement on Kosovo’s final status. The long-term success of any status agreement may depend on their efforts.

Mr. Chairman, I realize that I’ve used some strong words today, but the stakes in Kosovo are too high to risk failure on account of politeness. Notwithstanding the challenges ahead, I am optimistic about the future of Southeast Europe.

I look forward to a time when the only hearings this Committee convenes on the Balkans relate to how we can cooperate with region’s thriving democracies to address problems elsewhere in the world. I really believe we can get there.

Pristina is one of the few Muslim cities in the world where the United States is not only respected, but revered. If we get Kosovo right, Muslims around the world will be reminded how the United States came to the aid of Kosovo’s Muslim population and helped them build a strong, independent, multi-ethnic democracy.

That’s a great story, and it’s a story that needs to be told, but it won’t happen without a lot more work on the part of the Kosovars, the Serbs, and the international community.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to discussing the task before us with our witnesses. And, as the title of this hearing would suggest, I look forward to finding a way forward in Kosovo.