

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for Hearing on
“Kosovo: A Way Forward?”
November 8, 2005

Today, the Foreign Relations Committee meets to discuss the future of Kosovo and the American role in bringing stability to Southeastern Europe. During 1998 and 1999, the United States and our NATO allies attempted to stop the escalating violence between ethnic Albanians and Serb forces in Yugoslavia’s Kosovo province. These efforts culminated in 1999 in a 78-day NATO bombing campaign against Serbia. In June of that year, former Yugoslav leader, Slobodan Milosevic, agreed to withdraw his forces from the province. Since then, Kosovo has been administered by a combination of U.N and local Kosovar governing structures.

The U.N. Mission in Kosovo, known as UNMIK, retains ultimate political authority in the province, and it is backed up by a NATO-led peacekeeping force charged with providing a secure environment. At its inception, immediately after the bombing campaign, UNMIK assumed primary responsibility for promoting substantial autonomy and self-governance in Kosovo and for facilitating a political process to determine its future status. In 2004, UNMIK introduced the “standards before status” policy, which prescribed economic, political, and social benchmarks that were to be met in Kosovo before a final decision on Kosovo’s status was made.

The United States has played a leading role in assisting Kosovo to meet the “standards” established by the United Nations. Last month, based on the assessment provided in a report by the UN Special Envoy to Kosovo, the United Nations Security Council agreed to move to the next phase of the process in Kosovo. I commend the appointment of former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari to lead upcoming talks on the future status of Kosovo, and wish him well as he seeks to guide the parties to a compromise that will secure long-term peace in Southeastern Europe.

A peaceful and secure future for Kosovo lies in building democracy, respecting human rights, and fostering ethnic reconciliation. A successful conclusion to Kosovo’s status is crucial to Balkan reintegration into Europe. Much work is left to be done, however. The UN report praises Kosovo’s achievements in establishing new political and economic institutions and in developing a legislative framework. But it also details the challenges that remain, including widespread poverty, limited observance of the rule of law, a weak judicial system, and continued ethnic tensions. While many Kosovar Albanian leaders contend that Kosovo should be granted immediate and unconditional independence, many Serbian leaders have voiced their view that absolute independence for Kosovo is a non-starter. Bridging this diplomatic distance will require compromise among the parties and sustained commitment from the international community and the United States.

The United States continues to contribute nearly 2,000 troops to the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo. Because of the outstanding work of American peacekeeping troops and U.S. support for the “standards before status” policy, the United States retains significant credibility in the region. We must work closely with our European allies to improve the climate for peace.

We are pleased to welcome two distinguished witnesses who bring great expertise to our discussion of Kosovo. First, we will hear from Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, Nicholas Burns, who will update us on U.S. diplomatic efforts in the region. Then we will hear from Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, one of the architects of U.S. policy toward Southeastern Europe, who will offer his thoughts and recommendations on the future of Kosovo and the Balkans. We thank our witnesses for joining us and look forward to their insights.

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