

Erasing Balkan conspiracy theories

COMMENTARY
By ARISTOTLE TZIAMPIRIS *

In the past few weeks, US foreign policy in the Balkans has been the focus of considerable Greek attention. Leading journalists and opinion makers have concentrated on US statements concerning minorities in Greece, the future status of Kosovo and general support for Albania, while reminding the public of the USA's recognition of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) last year under its constitutional name and the more recent proposals by UN Special Representative Matthew Nimetz. To some, the conclusions reached are disturbing or even alarmist: that the US is causing political mischief in the Balkans that could result in instability, changed borders or potentially even armed conflict (even the presence of a US ambassadorial couple in Athens and Tirana is occasionally taken to indicate some sort of American conspiracy). Has Washington been caught red-handed by ever-vigilant reporters, or is reality more complex and nuanced, though far from entirely reassuring? I am convinced that the latter is actually the case. US foreign policy appears motivated by a strategic desire to resolve speedily most outstanding issues in the Balkans (in a manner of course as favorable to American interests as possible), so that diplomatic, economic and political resources can be concentrated on far more pressing issues and countries in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as at home. At this point, America's actions in the region can still be viewed as contributing toward a guardedly optimistic assessment of the Balkans' future. This is because a broad con-

sensus exists between the US, the European Union and most regional actors on the following policies: First, military actions are discouraged and condemned in a manner that cannot possibly be misinterpreted or misconstrued by anyone. There is simply no interest on the part of the US or the international community in general for a return to the wars that characterized the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. To claim otherwise is to ignore the will of all the Balkan peoples and also exhibit a crude ignorance of developments at the international diplomatic level. Secondly, any changes in the region's borders on the basis of partition plans linked to the existence of minority groups are simply unacceptable to all international actors. Such policies would be tantamount to opening a Pandora's box with harmful regional consequences. In many ways, the international community's policy preference was clearly communicated during the 2001 FYROM ethnic crisis. FYROM's ethnic Albanians were then made to understand that any partition goals would have to be abandoned in lieu of a multiethnic existence within the country's borders on the basis of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (that the US did not support Albanian separatists on this issue strongly suggests that Washington's actions are not motivated by some indiscriminate Albanianism, but are rather based on other regional geopolitical priorities and interests). Finally, there is agreement that the Balkans' best chance for economic prosperity and political stability is integrally linked to the path leading to Euro-Atlantic integration. It is only through joining NATO and even-



US peacekeepers play football in the snow on Christmas Day of 2001 at the American military camp of Banjevo in Srebovo, Kosovo. The US military has refuted reports that it run a Guantanamo-type detention center in Kosovo. The allegations were made by the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner Alvaro Gil-Robles.

tually the European Union that the region can enter into a new historic era of democracy and development. With the European Union's Western Balkan enlargement now looking somewhat more distant, it is primarily NATO membership and Partnership for Peace (PfP) agreements in the short run (most likely in 2008) that can keep the region on course toward Euro-Atlantic structures. Fortunately, Washington is actively in favor of the Western Balkan states joining NATO and signing PfP agreements, given the satisfaction of some necessary criteria. By denouncing military governments, rejecting changes in borders on the basis of partition and supporting the region's Euro-Atlantic future, the United States in essence complements the European Union's Balkan strategy and mostly contributes to efforts aimed at avoid-

ing instability. It should be stressed, however, that altruism is not necessarily a motive behind US foreign policy in the Balkans. By assisting in the resolution of the region's outstanding issues, Washington will "release" economic and military capital to be utilized elsewhere. Most likely, it will also ensure that a series of regional states will be broadly supportive of its international preferences and decisions — witness Albania and FYROM participating in the "coalition of the willing," sending troops to Iraq, signing the African Charter and allowing the exemption of US personnel from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court. Finally, a word of caution is in order. Things could still go badly in the Balkans, especially if negotiations concerning the future status of Kosovo (for which the US expresses

a keen interest) are mishandled, or the region's EU perspective appears unattainable or too distant. In addition, problems concerning organized crime, corruption, unemployment and the treatment of minority groups will hardly disappear overnight. In this sense, it is Euro-Atlantic complementarity, in tune with the priorities and needs of the region's peoples, that is of the essence. The US, the EU and Greece — as part of the EU as well as its membership in international organizations and on the UN Security Council — must continue to play an active and constructive role.

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