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Opponents of a new Kosovo must be stopped

By Joseph Biden

Years of hand-wringing and chest-thumping over the future status of Kosovo may finally be drawing to a close. In the next few months, adroit diplomacy to secure Kosovo's independence could yield a victory for Muslim democracy, a better future for south-east Europe and validation for the judicious use of American power.

But along with the potential for triumph in Kosovo, there is a growing risk that Serbia and Russia will conspire to seize defeat from the jaws of victory. Extremists in Belgrade and Moscow are - for very different reasons - hoping to use Russia's United Nations Security Council veto to quash Kosovo's bid for independence. If they succeed, the Balkans will emerge as another source of bad news in a world already crowded with crises.

During the seven years since Nato ended Slobodan Milosevic's reign of terror in Kosovo, a UN-backed administration has largely succeeded in bringing stability to the province. However, Kosovo's people are justifiably tired of a status quo marked by uncertainty and economic privation. These two intertwined problems will continue so long as the debate over the province's future remains unresolved. Its ambiguous status is also leading to stagnation in Serbia.

Nationalist politicians in Belgrade have embraced the fight against Kosovo's independence to divert public attention from their own failures and Serbia's stalled bid for European Union membership. The actions of Vojislav Kostunica, Serbia's prime minister, have been particularly disappointing. In addition to refusing international requests to call for the arrest of war crimes fugitives Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, Mr Kostunica has rejected every attempt at compromise on Kosovo. Serbia's moral authority on the issue hit a new low in October when the 1.5m ethnic Albanian residents of the province were denied the right to vote in a deeply flawed constitutional referendum that declared Kosovo an integral part of Serbia.

To their great credit, the people of Serbia have proved more realistic about Kosovo than their elected leaders. Opinion polls show that many Serbs foresee that the province will gain independence. Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, meanwhile, overwhelmingly expect to sever ties with Serbia. With citizens on both sides of the issue ready to finish the debate and move on to more constructive challenges, leaders who block a solution will do so at their peril.

Historically, trouble in the Balkans is almost always the result of false expectations. On the whole, the citizens of south-east Europe are mentally prepared for an independent Kosovo.

If Belgrade postpones a settlement it will reopen the issue for many Serbs previously resigned to Kosovo's independence and further inflame frustrations among the region's ethnic Albanians. The result could be a return of the mob violence that shook Kosovo in March 2004.

A Russian effort to delay a deal on Kosovo would be in keeping with the Kremlin's habit of fostering weak, subservient governments in formerly communist states. Moscow has apparently reached the conclusion that impoverished, unstable regimes are easier targets for manipulation than prosperous, independent countries. It has made extensive, public use of oil and gas diplomacy to undermine the budding democracies of eastern Europe. Less attention has focused on the Kremlin's quiet efforts to exacerbate territorial conflicts in Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan. Serbia could become the latest victim of this strategy.

Kosovo is not ready for full sovereignty. Even after independence, Nato and the international community will need to provide security guarantees for Kosovo's minorities and strengthen its economy and institutions. But it is time to grant the province independence. The longer the status debate continues, the further Kosovo and Serbia will fall behind other rapidly progressing former Yugoslav republics such as Croatia and Slovenia.

Success in Kosovo, if realised, will have implications far beyond the Balkans. A responsible Russian approach to the issue could demonstrate the Kremlin's commitment to global order at a time when its credibility is in tatters. The people of Kosovo - already the most pro-American in the Islamic world - will provide a much-needed example of a successful US-Muslim partnership. Stability in south-east Europe would be a welcome bit of good news and offer hope in a season of tremendous foreign policy challenges.

The writer is the incoming Democratic chairman of the US Senate foreign relations committee

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