



Teleconference Briefing on Kosovo

Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs
Washington, DC
February 18, 2008

(12:35 p.m. EST)

MR. CASEY: Okay, thank you, everybody, for joining us this afternoon. I hope you've all had a chance to see and read the statement from the Secretary concerning Kosovo's declaration of independence. We've got with us here this afternoon Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nick Burns to talk to you a little bit more both about the decision that's been announced today as well as a little bit about where we go from here.

So, Nick, let me turn it over to you, let you make some introductory remarks, and then we'll go to people's questions.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Tom, can I just ask, is this on the record?

MR. CASEY: Yes, we're on the record.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Okay, on the record. Thanks. Hello, everyone. This is Nick Burns.

This is obviously a historic day for the people of Kosovo and, as you know, Secretary Rice has just issued her statement of congratulations, of recognition. So the United States is today formally recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign and independent state. We are also going to be establishing diplomatic relations. President Bush is sending a letter to the President of Kosovo, President Sejdiu, that we're responding affirmatively to the proposal made by Kosovo that we do establish diplomatic relations.

I'd just make a couple of major points, then we'll go right to questions. The first is this. This culminates a decade of U.S. policy to support the people of Kosovo and to support the idea of stability and peace and justice in Kosovo. And the Bush Administration has worked very hard over the last three years to try to prepare for this day. We were among the leaders with the European allies in trying to make sure there was a United Nations process to look into the status of Kosovo. That resulted in President Ahtisaari, Martti Ahtisaari's report to the Secretary General of the UN a year ago. We've worked very hard since then to be part of the international negotiations to see if it was possible to have an agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. That was not the case. And we've worked closely with the European countries for today's decision.

We have recognized Kosovo. Many other states have as well. Just in the last two hours, I've been on the phone with my European counterparts, and after a long meeting in Brussels of the EU foreign ministers, you've now seen many of the EU countries come forward to recognize Kosovo. We've also seen early recognitions by Turkey, and by Afghanistan, and by Australia. And we've seen a very strong and supportive comment by the Organization of the Islamic Conference which is meeting in Dakar in Senegal. So think a very good early start for this country.

I also wanted to say that we will be working with the government to try to help it politically as well as economically. There will be a donors conference in a couple of months time in Europe. The United States is already one of the largest donors to Kosovo. In fact, in 2008 we'll be conveying around \$335 million^[1] in U.S. aid to Kosovo. That's a sizeable amount, and we're encouraging other countries to do as much.

So with that as just a few major points at the top, I'm happy to take any questions that you have.

MR. CASEY: Okay, Calvin, if you want to bring in our questioners.

OPERATOR: Thank you, sir. At this time, if you would like to ask a question, please press *1 on your touchtone keypad. That is *1 if you would like to ask a question. One moment for our first question, please. Our first question comes from Andrea Mitchell. You may ask your question, and please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Thank you. Hi, Nick. Andrea Mitchell, NBC News.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes. Hi, Andrea.

QUESTION: How do you deal with critics who say that this will lead to increasing volatility in the region, that Serbia will have to do something that will lead to worse relations with Russia, and the concerns of other countries in the neighborhood about legitimizing groups that were previously described as terror groups?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first of all, we made – Andrea, we made the basic assumption over the last several years, and this is a long-term policy over two administrations, the Bush Administration and the Clinton Administration, that given what happened in the breakup of Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo in 1998, the attempted ethnic cleansing of more than 1 million Kosovar Albanian Muslims, the brutal war that Milosevic fought with them, and of course, the NATO intervention in 1999 and nine years of United Nations rule since then, this is an extraordinarily complex situation but it's rather unique. So we don't see the independence of Kosovo as some kind of precedent that would – that should encourage in any way, shape or form other groups to break away from nation-states in Europe. But we do think that this is the final death knell, if you will, of Yugoslavia. And Yugoslavia broke up over the period of 1991 all the way now to 2008, and this is the just resolution of that problem.

In terms of volatility and violence, we made the assumption over the last several years, certainly in this Administration over the last three years since we began working very intensively on the final status issue for Kosovo, that not acting and not deciding the final status of Kosovo will be much more likely to lead to violence than action. That's an assumption we made. That's an assumption that the European Union made. I think it underlies the report of Martti Ahtisaari, the envoy of the United Nations whose plan provides the basis for the new independent state. They will undergo a period of supervised independence now. The European Union will be introducing a civilian mission to take the place of the United Nations office that has been there for nine years. NATO is going to stay and, in fact, NATO met this morning and reaffirmed its decision to stay in Kosovo. The EU made its decision two days ago.

And so I think that we should see a period of stability. And the goal is to help this country now get on its feet, become fully independent, but to help the entire region of the Balkans be more calm and stable. As Secretary Rice said in her statement, we're now looking for Serbia, which is obviously going to be extremely unhappy about what the international community is doing today, we're looking for Serbia, however, to take its place in the European Union in the future and in a better relationship with NATO and as a friend of the U.S. I would just say that this is the right decision for us and it's the right decision if the international community wants to minimize the chance of violence in the future. Had we not acted, there would have been a tremendous amount of pressure for independence. I think that probably would have encouraged the kind of violence and instability that we are now hoping to prevent.

QUESTION: And what do you say to Putin and to Russia in general?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, you know, we, of course, have worked very closely with Russia for the last decade, but you have to remember that Russia left Kosovo. Russia did not stay in Kosovo along with the rest of the international community. We did stay. We kept our troops in KFOR. We had our political and economic support for Kosovo. We worked with the Russians over the last year. When Ahtisaari came out with his report in the spring of 2007, we had wanted to have an affirmative vote at the Security Council to affirm that plan and to put it into place. Russia did not agree.

So we then agreed to 130 days of negotiations where Russia, the United States and the EU each provided a diplomat, and they shuttled back and forth between Belgrade and Pristina for four months. And we tried to engineer a solution to the problem, but it was not possible. And just as the Ahtisaari plan had said, it wasn't possible to have a solution between Belgrade and Pristina. Those negotiations, I think, prove that.

So we gave Russia every chance, both in the Security Council last spring and summer, in the negotiations which we co-sponsored with the Russians, but now we have to move ahead. And we are the countries recognizing today – the members of the EU, the United States, Turkey, countries that have played the biggest role in Kosovo. So we know we're making the right decision. And we'll have a disagreement with the Russians, but we're the ones that have been on the ground and we're the ones that have the responsibility to help Kosovo now get on its feet.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Sylvie Lanteaume. You may ask your question.

QUESTION: Hi, Nick. This is Sylvie.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Hello, Sylvie.

QUESTION: The Secretary said in her statement that the U.S. will work with international partners to help implement the Ahtisaari plan.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes.

QUESTION: What kind of – what exactly are you going to do?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: The Ahtisaari plan is, in essence, the basis for the statehood of Kosovo. As I said in reply to Andrea's question, it provides for a period of supervised independence. What that means is that there will be two institutions that will be on the ground in Kosovo playing a major role trying to guide them forward and help them resolve the challenges ahead. The first is the European Union, which will have a civilian mission on the ground relatively shortly. The second is NATO, which has the KFOR mission that's been there since June of 1999, following the prosecution of the Kosovar war. And so those two institutions will be there to help guide the new Kosovar Government.

But also very importantly, the Ahtisaari plan calls for a set of assurances for the security and safety of the Kosovar Serb population. You know, roughly 92 to 94 percent of the population are Kosovar Albanian Muslims, which also give you an idea of the overwhelming pressure for independence. But there's a significant Serb minority community. That community has the right to stay in Kosovo, to be citizens of Kosovo, to live peacefully. You know, there's been violence over the last – well, many, many years, over the last generation, between the major groups. And the Ahtisaari plan asks the Government of Kosovo, the new government, to put in place laws and procedures to safeguard the rights of that community. In fact, I called the President of Kosovo just about a half an hour ago to congratulate him and I'm waiting to speak to Prime Minister Thaci, and I know that they are in session right now beginning to implement – put in place some of the laws that the Ahtisaari plan calls for.

So I think all of us believe that one of the most important features of this new government will be reaching out to the Serbs, encouraging them to stay in Kosovo – those that live there – and providing them the rights and physical security to stay. That's also the job of KFOR, of the NATO forces, to protect the Serb monasteries and churches that are a big part of Serb culture in Kosovo and have been there for, as you know, hundreds of years, and to provide physical protection should there be any kind of threats or attacks on the minority population. And we take that obligation very seriously.

So the Ahtisaari plan is the bedrock of this, and we will see – we have seen both from President Sejdiu and Prime Minister Thaci – we've seen and heard very strong assurances that they intend to implement that plan fully and to protect the rights of the Kosovar Serbs. And if you look at the statement of independence made yesterday by Prime Minister Thaci and the Kosovo Assembly, he spoke part of his address in Serbo-Croatian. He told the Serbs that they would be protected and that the majority population wanted them to stay. So it's that kind of thing that we're looking for from the new government.

QUESTION: But do you plan to maintain troops on the ground?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: NATO has decided to maintain the presence of the KFOR troops. We have nearly 17,000 NATO troops in Kosovo. They've been there since June 1999, since the war ended. Among – of those 17,000, roughly 1,600 – 1,600 – are American troops.

QUESTION: Okay.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And we will all stay. NATO met this morning, and you'll look for a public statement that the North Atlantic Council issued saying that we're going to stay. But that decision was made, actually, last autumn by the NATO foreign ministers that we would stay should Kosovo status change. And it's certainly changed today.

QUESTION: Thank you.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: And we've not put a time limit, by the way, on how long NATO would stay. And the United States, of course, has reassured all the allies and the Kosovar Government that we intend to keep our troops there as long as the mission is there.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Zain Verjee. You may ask your question, and please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Hi, CNN. Hi, Nick.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Hi, Zain.

QUESTION: Doesn't this, though, suggest a fairly dismissive attitude, particularly toward Russia? You know the Russians have objected strongly, of course. But doesn't this sort of set the stage of prompting another crisis with Russia and could undermine issues on Iran, on North Korea and continue to sour relations?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: We see no reason that it should. We've worked very closely with the Russians. You remember back in 1999 when we worked with the Russians; the Russians were part of this international effort for many years until they left Kosovo several years ago. But we have worked particularly closely with Russia over the last year, as I mentioned in response to Andrea's question. We were ready to recognize Kosovo – the United States – a year ago when the Ahtisaari plan was

unveiled, but it was the express wish of Russia that we not have a Security Council decision last spring and summer to recognize Kosovo, that we first give the chance – the opportunity for additional negotiations. And we joined the Russians and the European Union in four months of negotiations. We have been in touch with the Russians, you know, on a weekly basis. We have been part of the so-called Contact Group together for many, many years – Russian and American diplomats. Secretary Rice has had innumerable conversations with Minister Lavrov. In fact, they just spoke this morning by phone – Secretary Rice, I think when she was traveling from Kenya to Tanzania. So the Russians aren't going to be surprised by our position.

And I should also say this is the position of the great majority of the European Union countries who are recognizing today, along with significant countries in the Muslim world and in the Far East. So I think we are – we're going to be in the vanguard of countries recognizing Kosovo. And certainly among those countries that have done the most for Kosovo, that have had their troops on the ground, that have given economic assistance, that have been involved since '98, '99 in preventing the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar population, this is no surprise to the Russians that this day has come.

I would also tell you, as you already know, that the resolution that we passed in June 1999, UN Security Council Resolution 1244, it foresaw a period of time when Kosovo's final status would have to be decided. And that resolution was very specific: It essentially required Serbia to withdraw its military, its paramilitary and its police forces from Kosovo; it suspended Belgrade's governance over Kosovo; it placed Kosovo under UN administration. It's been under UN administration for nine years.

So for countries to say somehow this is a shock or that this is not the correct move, correct step politically or legally, that we just fundamentally disagree with that point. So I do not expect any kind of crisis with Russia over this. We expect the Russians to be supportive of stability in the region, and I think that all of us are going to be requesting that people remain calm and that the Kosovar authorities be allowed to establish this government and to move forward.

QUESTION: Just one other quick thing. You've spoken directly to the leaders, the President and the Prime Minister?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yeah.

QUESTION: Has Secretary Rice?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I'm calling them right now, just given the time difference, because Secretary Rice is in between Nairobi and, I think, Tanzania. And so I'm sure she'll be calling them in the next day or two. I called simply to say – to inform them that Secretary Rice had announced we had recognized Kosovo and that we were forming diplomatic relations. I wanted them to know that before they got into their national – their assembly session. But I know that we'll have high-level contacts in the next 24 hours.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yeah.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Susan Cornwell. You may ask your question, and please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Yeah, hi. This is Susan Cornwell with Reuters. Can you hear me?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes, I hear you fine, Susan.

QUESTION: Great. I just wondered how long you think NATO forces may have to stay in Kosovo. I mean, are you thinking it could be years more? And I think you said a minute ago, you expect stability there. Are you saying that you don't expect violence now?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, on the first question, we have – NATO has not put a time limit on the deployment of the KFOR force. And we'll just – we'll have to take this step by step. The reason for the NATO troops, of course, is to help the new state – the presence of NATO troops is to help the new state through a period of forming itself and getting on its feet, but also to protect the minority populations, specifically the Kosovar Serbs, and to help in training of a police force that can in the future take over the job of security and stability inside the borders of the country itself. So we haven't put a time limit on it.

In terms of violence, we have specifically called on the people of Kosovo to remain calm. The NATO leaders have, the EU leaders have, the new President and Prime Minister have. And we fully expect that law and order will be maintained. The United Nations police force and the NATO military force are there to maintain law and order, and they have pledged to do so. It has been a relatively quiet first 24 hours and it's our strong hope that that will be sustained.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Adu Ozyurt. You may ask your question.

QUESTION: I have two quick questions, sir. One is, apparently, there are some demonstrations in Belgrade. Besides the declaration and the announcement by the Secretary, will there be any initiatives towards Serbia?

And the second one is there seems to be some disagreement within the NATO, including countries like Greece and Spain, regarding the independence of Kosovo. Do you think this will endanger the future of the alliance or, you know, create some sort of disagreement within the alliance that may endanger further missions?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first of all, there have been some small demonstrations in Belgrade. There were yesterday and again today. But we're very grateful to the Serb police and the Serb Government for maintaining law and order, and for maintaining the security around our Embassy and those of the other European countries.

Secondly, on Serbia, we have made a major effort to reach out to the Serb Government over the last several years. And we've made the point to the Serbs that we understand completely that we have a disagreement with them, that they're going to be – they're not going to at all support the actions taken by the European Union countries, some of the Asian countries and the United States today; but that we fully expect that Serbia's future should be in Europe and that some future association by Serbia – of Serbia with the European Union, excuse me, is necessary, that we want Serbia's relationship with NATO to grow. We see Serbia as part of Europe, and we know that the Balkans is the last part of Europe that has not received the benefits of the end of the Cold War, economic or political.

Yugoslavia had to break up, and it did, and this is the last vestige of the former Yugoslavia – the fact that Kosovo has now become free and independent. Now, we hope the Serb people, the Kosovars, the Bosnians, the Montenegrins, the Croatians, Albanians and Macedonians, all of them can look towards a future in Europe, and that's with the EU and NATO. And that's our message.

Secretary Rice called President Tadic yesterday and she had, I think, a good conversation with him. They obviously did not agree on this question, but she reaffirmed the strong interest that we have in a good relationship with Serbia. And we'll continue that in the days ahead and the weeks ahead.

Finally, I would just say in terms of NATO and the European Union, the vast majority of members of both organizations are recognizing Kosovo today and have already taken that step. Some members have not. We appreciate that they have a disagreement. I would expect that the majority of them will find their way towards recognition in

a short period of time, but I don't want to speak for them. And there may be one or two countries that decide that, for whatever, reason, maybe domestic reasons, they can't take that step right now. We respect that difference. But I think what's important is the great majority of countries are recognizing today.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: As a reminder, if you would like to ask a question, please press *1 on your touchtone keypad. Our next question comes from Nicholas R. Kralev. You may ask your question, and please state your organization.

QUESTION: *Washington Times*. Hi, Nick.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Hi, Nick.

QUESTION: You talked about helping Kosovo to get on its feet. Can you tell us what ideas you have in that respect? Because they obviously have some economic concerns in Kosovo, a lot of concerns about trafficking of people, and you clearly don't want to see a Muslim-dominated state in Europe with such problems, especially among the young population. So you do have any ideas in that respect?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, first of all, Kosovo is going to be a vastly majority Muslim state, given the fact that 92 to 94 percent of their population is Muslim. And we think it is a very positive step that this Muslim state, Muslim majority state, has been created today. It's a stable – we think it's going to be a stable state.

The people of Kosovo – and I've been there many times over the last several years – have been remarkably patient. They've been living for nine years not knowing what the future of their country was going to be. And with the exception of an outbreak in violence which was quite serious in March of 2004, nearly four years ago now, there has been relative peace and stability in Kosovo, and we think that should be maintained. What we need to do is reach out politically to recognize them, establish diplomatic relations. And we're encouraging as many states as possible to do that.

And secondly, the country is going to need a lot of economic assistance. So I mentioned before that there'll be a donors conference hosted by one of the European countries in several months. We gave – the United States extended \$77 million in assistance to Kosovo last year in 2007. We're going to put forward roughly \$334 million [\[2\]](#) in assistance in 2008. And we specifically would like to see the involvement of the World Bank and of the other European development banks to help the people of Kosovo create a modern economy.

We certainly would like to see debt relief for Kosovo because that will be an immediate way to help them. And we would like, obviously, to see as much regional trade and investment as is possible in that region.

And so I think it's going to be a very tall order. There are many challenges ahead. But it's clearly the right decision, and I think the European Union will be – will bear the greatest share of responsibility, given the fact that this is a European country. But the United States, given our long involvement, is going to be one of the leaders in this effort as well.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Sylvie Lanteaume. You may ask your question.

QUESTION: Yeah, Nick, I have another question. You said that Secretary Rice called President Tadic yesterday.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Yes.

QUESTION: Did he commit not to break the relations with U.S. after the recognition?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I don't believe – I don't believe that was discussed. You know, we have actually a very active relationship with Serbia. The United States is one of the largest – I think we're the largest investor in Serbia. If we're not the largest – it changes month to month – we're the second largest. A lot of American corporate involvement.

We have a much closer relationship with Serbia, obviously, than we did in the latter part of the 1990s when we twice had to – well, the first time in Bosnia and the second in Kosovo, use force against first the Bosnian Serbs and the Serb Army. We have the beginnings of a military relationship. We have encouraged Serbia to come into a closer partnership with NATO. And so I would expect our diplomatic relationship to continue. I just talked to the Serb Ambassador Friday. He came to see me. We had a long conversation. I expect I'll talk to him today or tomorrow. And I wouldn't expect our diplomatic relationship to be downgraded in any way. And our Ambassador, Cameron Munter, in Belgrade has been very active over the last couple of days.

So I don't think it came up in the conversation between Tadic and Secretary Rice, but I don't expect a major change in that regard.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Halil Mula. You may ask your question, and please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Yes, sir. Halil Mula with RTV-21. First of all, I would like to thank you, Ambassador Burns, for all your input and help toward Kosovo. Second would be, what do you expect from today's meeting at the Security Council that is being called? What are they going to participate – President of Kosovo – of Serbia, I'm sorry, Tadic?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, you know, there was a meeting of the Security Council yesterday. There'll be a second meeting today. We expect President Tadic to come. I imagine that Russia and Serbia will say that the action – the declaration of independence is illegal under international law. That's what Russia essentially said yesterday. And of course, we fundamentally disagree with that.

And I would just – this is important for those of you writing about this aspect of it. Resolution 1244, which was passed in June '99, is the basis of the Kosovo situation itself. It envisaged a final status process for Kosovo, but it did not determine what the outcome would be. And as I said before, it ordered the removal of the Serb Army and the Serb Government and it ordered the United Nations to take over the province, and that's been the status of the province for the last nine years.

There is nothing in Resolution 1244 that would prevent or make illegal a declaration of independence. There is nothing in 1244 that would prevent the establishment of a new state. In fact, 1244 and its major effort essentially says there has to be a UN-led presence to decide the future status of Kosovo, and that's what we've seen over the last two years with President Martti Ahtisaari, the former president of Finland, leading that. He recommended to the United Nations—the United Nations envoy, that there be – that independence come to Kosovo and that it be supervised independence. He recommended the EU go in. He recommended that NATO stay.

So what we will say today is that we have respected 1244, that we have made this decision, as have many other countries, because it's in the best interest of the stability of Kosovo; but there's nothing in 1244, nothing at all from a legal point of view, that would indicate that what the Kosovar Government has done is illegal or somehow contrary to 1244. So, frankly, I think the United States, the European countries, the Arab and Muslim countries that are recognizing Kosovo today stand on very solid legal ground. We have been the ones on the ground in Kosovo for the last nine years. We have been the ones who have contributed our soldiers. And I think we're doing absolutely the right thing for stability in Kosovo and peace, which, of course, is one of the most important objectives of the United Nations.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: At this time, I'm showing no further questions.

MR. CASEY: Okay. Well, Nick, thank you very much for joining us this afternoon. Thank you, everybody out there, for your questions. I'm sure we'll have a lot more opportunities to talk about this in the days and weeks ahead.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Okay.

MR. CASEY: So thank you, all. And thanks again, Nick.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Thanks. Bye-bye.

[1] Total projected U.S. assistance to Kosovo for 2008 is \$335 million. [\[return to text\]](#)

[2] Total projected U.S. assistance to Kosovo for 2008 is \$335 million. [\[return to text\]](#)

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