

Paper 21

Reflections on the Lessons of Kosovo

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21.1 INTRODUCTION

In many ways the mode of intervention by the United States (US) – led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Kosovo reveals more clearly the parameters of foreign policy with respect to national liberation movements that are being drawn by the ruling classes of the US and European Union (EU), which together constitute in effect the international community. The intervention of course has numerous other economic and political objectives; and there are issues of moral legitimacy, legal validity and the veracity of political (humanitarian) justification. They have been examined in some detail by several analysts.

Geo-political evaluations scrutinised the implacable opposition of many of NATO's (Christian) member-States to Kosovo's possible emergence as an independent (Muslim) State in the heart of Europe and exposed the professed humanitarian concern of NATO for the plight of Kosovars as political eyewash. Assessments of geo-strategic imperatives, which propel the member-States of NATO in general and the US in particular, laid bare the ruthless manoeuvres of their ruling classes to pre-empt Kosovo's independence by conjuring up the spectre of a

Greater (Muslim) Albania and to neutralise a pan-Slav alliance between Yugoslavia and the Russia-Belarus Union.

Others brought to light economic interests and linked the western military operations in Yugoslavia (and earlier in Iraq) to acquiring control over the vast oil fields in post-Cold War Central Asia, coveted by the American and West-European petroleum multinational companies.

Studies of the similarities between Kosovo and Tamil Eelam condemned State terror, national oppression, enforced refugee movements and the use of food as a weapon of war. Those that looked at the dissimilarities expressed concern especially over the international community's evident lack of humanitarian concern for the plight of Tamil people and its manifest avoidance of the demand for the withdrawal of armed forces by the Sri Lankan State from the Tamil homeland in the North-East Province (NEP).

The present essay, however, seeks to probe the implications that flow from the case of Kosovo for the right of external self-determination demanded by the national liberation movements in Asia and Africa in general and the Ceylon Tamil national liberation movement, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in Sri Lanka particular.

21.2 EXTERNAL SELF-DETERMINATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

During the first half of the 20th century, the West-centric international community obstinately stood by the European colonisers rejection of the right of external self-determination of colonial territories in Asia and Africa. Each colonising State justified this by concocting the legal fiction that its colonial territories are extensions of its national territory; a claim which could be asserted only as long as the coloniser possessed undisputed military advantage (as demonstrated, for example, by the de-colonisation of the former Portuguese colony of Goa).

Predictably the international community's political myopia did not stop the march of history. Instead it dialectically brought forth numerous anti-colonial liberation movements in Asia and Africa. They struggled for the external de-colonisation of colonial territories, that is, the dismantling European colonialism. This first phase of de-colonisation gathered momentum during the post-Second World War period. Many of them breached the monopoly of control over the instruments of force hitherto held by the colonising States, honed their capacity for armed struggle and emerged victorious to form their respective independent States. Others went through the so-called non-violent transfer of power, that is, they negotiated the terms of neo-colonial dependence in return for the chimera of political independence whilst the levers of economic control and cultural hegemony remained in the grip of the colonisers.

External de-colonisation transformed colonial territories into post-colonial States, which by and large are the bleeding, twitching, pathetic remnants of the crumbling European empires.

The States are in most cases multi-national political vestiges of European plunder that have been dignified with national flags, seats in the United Nations and spurious histories conjured up virtually overnight by the fawning ideologues of the respective major nations.

The second phase is constituted by the national liberation movements for internal de-colonisation within former colonial territories. For European colonialism had de-empowered nations, denied their right of self-determination in the internal and external forms and arbitrarily lashed them together within each colonial territory. Colonialism also reproduced its Centre-Periphery relations of national oppression and economic exploitation within each colonial territory typically between the major (numerically larger) nation and the minor (numerically smaller) nations.

In almost every post-colonial instance State power had invariably passed at independence into the hands of the major and now dominant nation and the new State became the embodiment of its national aspirations, expressed by the official language, State religion and so on. The minor and now subjugated nations, excluded from access to effective State power, continued to be colonies but of the internal variety of the newly-independent State, controlled by the major nation. Their demand for internal de-colonisation, consequently, seeks precisely the re-empowerment of subject minor nations. It surfaced rapidly and is today the ideological core of the approximately 150 movements for self-determination (including the right to independent Statehood) world-wide.

The international community obstinately opposed external self-determination through internal de-colonisation. However, in cases where the US and EU Governments perceived a geo-

political advantage, they stoked the demand for internal de-colonisation and endorsed external self-determination. When, for example, the people of Colombia's northern territory (Panama) sought independence, the US Government, which had already drawn up plans for the construction of the Panama Canal, promoted the external self-determination of the Panamanian people and served as the political midwife for the independence of Panama from Colombia in 1903. The intervention by the United States had virtually nothing to do with professed altruism and almost everything to do with self-interest: namely, establishing direct control over the proposed Canal, through a client Panamanian State set up by, and subservient to, Washington.

Again at the end of the First World War the British and US Governments invoked the principle of nationality – that is, each nationality its State, each State its nationality – to undermine the Ottoman Empire by promoting the external self-determination of many peoples and nations ruled by that Empire in Eastern Europe.

Perhaps the most blatant, recent instance where a national liberation movement was exploited for geo-political ends is the case of Eritrea. At first the US Government backed Emperor Haile Salassie of Ethiopia and, consequently, denigrated the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) as terrorists and rejected the Eritrean claim to external self-determination. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, supported the Eritrean national liberation movement on grounds that it was an important component of the African anti-imperialist struggle. When Colonel Mengistu overthrew the Emperor and installed a pro-Soviet regime, Moscow switched allegiance, aligned with Addis Ababa and rejected Eritrean external self-determination; whilst Washington came to the

rescue of Eritrea and re-cast the EPLF as freedom fighters engaged in a struggle against communism.

Another instance occurred during the Gulf War. The US Government with the concurrence of the EU encouraged the Kurdish liberation movement within Iraq to increase domestic opposition and thereby temporarily weaken the capacity of President Saddam Hussain's Government to wage war. But, after the war ended, the United States scaled down support for the Kurds in order to ensure that President Saddam Hussain stayed in power and remained a credible challenge to Iran's political ambitions of regional domination.

In South Asia, the Punjabi-controlled Pakistani regime repressed the Bengali demand for external self-determination in the then East Pakistan. But the Indian State, confident in the knowledge that the Indian Union was secure under the strong Congress (I) Party in the Centre, promoted the liberation movement in East Pakistan and engineered the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and demoted Pakistan's status as a South Asian regional power. But by the late 1980s the Centre was considerably weakened by the decline of the Congress (I) Party as an All-India political force and by the growth of national movements, deceptively referred to as 'regional parties,' in the Indian states. Consequently, the Central Government came to view national liberation movements in States bordering on India as seriously de-stabilising, as potential encouragement to national movements in many Indian states. So it emphasised internal self-determination, which excludes the right to form an independent State, for the Ceylon Tamil national liberation movement.

In Kosovo, too, internal self-determination or limited autonomy is being offered to Kosovo by

NATO in return for support from the moderate Muslim politicians. Given the back-drop of NATO air strikes, the palpable aim is to coerce the Yugoslav Government to concede the strategic interests largely of the US Government. It follows that NATO's patently disingenuous conditional offer, in the Rambouillet document, of full independence probably in about three years was floated in a Machiavellian move to blunt the unflagging commitment of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) cadre to the creation of an independent State and thereby emasculate their liberation struggle.

Moreover, to prevent the KLA from taking control of Kosovo after the Serbian forces are compelled to withdraw, NATO proposes to deploy a military force to replace the Serbian forces. The deployment, escalated from 28,000 to 60,000, is ostensibly to protect the Kosovars but is in fact intended primarily to neutralise the KLA, which unlike the pliable moderate Kosovo politicians, is unlikely to be deceived into complacency or inveigled into compromising on its demand for full independence.

Striking similarities could be gleaned in the Indian Governments multi-pronged approach to bring to heel the pro-American United National Party (UNP) Government in Sri Lanka. New Delhi cultivated the so-called moderate (read: collaborationist) Tamil political parties between 1983 and 1987; it cornered the Government in international fora on grounds of human rights violations and genocide of Tamils in the NEP; and it aggressively flew its air force jets over the northern Jaffna peninsula in mid-1987, under the pretext of dropping food for Tamils, but in fact as a clear message to the Government that force would be used if necessary. Colombo caved in. The Sri Lankan Government conceded the Indian Governments geo-political interests un-

der the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement to Establish Peace and Normalcy in Sri Lanka and consented to the induction of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the Tamil Homeland.

The IPKF replaced the Sri Lankan armed forces in the NEP and was unleashed primarily to emasculate the LTTE, the only liberation organisation that is unswervingly committed to the establishment of the independent State of Tamil Eelam and did not, and still does not, accept New Delhi's diktat.

21.3 INTERNAL DE-COLONISATION AND STATE-FORMATION

As a general rule, then, the West-centric international community continues to oppose external self-determination – now an outcome of internal de-colonisation. The reason is not merely the normative imperatives of State power to protect sovereignty and defend territorial integrity; it has also concretely to do with the desire of the international community to arrest the unfavourable shift in the global balance of political power. Because, the emergence of new States in Asia and Africa has progressively tipped the balance of voting power in international institutions against the US and EU Governments. This trend was graphically demonstrated when the United Nations General Assembly, with a majority composed of newly-independent States, voted to admit the Peoples Republic of China as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and so frustrated the manoeuvres of the United States, together with its West European allies and neo-colonial vassals to retain and entrench the position of the Democratic Republic of China (Taiwan) in the United Nations. This prompted the US Government to rave against what it savaged as the tyranny of the majority.

The areas of contradiction between the rul-

ing oligarchies of newly-independent territories and the international community should not be allowed to detract from the interests common between the two. A commonality relevant to this analysis is the urge to preserve the existing borders of former colonial territories. The oligarchies, drawn almost exclusively from major nations, are invariably semi-feudal in nature and incapable of comprehending the complexities peculiar to the dove-tailing between the national questions and internal de-colonisation on the threshold of the 21st century. They are blindly seeking security guarantees from the US and some EU Governments to hold on to State borders drawn by colonialism. In turn the international community has obliged in most instances for two major reasons: firstly to thwart any challenge to the political status quo and balance of power within the world system of States constructed by western imperialism; and secondly, as a trade-off for untrammelled access for US and European multi-national companies to the economic resources of the former colonial territories. The numerous institutes or centres for Strategic Studies, funded by European and American institutions and breeding faster than rabbits, constitute the neo-colonial institutional interface between the two.

21.4 THE NEXT DECADE

The national liberation movements today, therefore, are objectively progressive forces seeking to eradicate the remaining colonial attributes of the world system of States. The universality of this phenomenon is underscored by the cases of the Scottish and Welsh nations, two of the earliest of modern colonies in Europe.

England conquered Wales and Scotland in 1505 and 1707 respectively, destroyed the Scottish language and virtually eliminated Welsh,

and debased their cultures. The English refer delicately to this ethnocide and colonial incorporation as the Union. Despite the colonial foundation of Britain, argued English ideologues, the spread of liberal values, the guarantee of individual rights, the stable Westminster democratic system and, most importantly, the independent judiciary contributed to the unificatory British nationalism; which allegedly had eradicated the need for Wales and Scotland to regain their independence. But the sustained struggles of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Scottish National Liberation Army (SNLA) have made Scotland's independence virtually certain; and the SNP has declared that Scotland will regain its independence by the year 2007, the 300th year of its subjugation. The Plaid Cymru in Wales is very likely to follow suit.

The reasons for the resurgence of Scottish and Welsh national liberation movements are fairly clear. Collective or national rights are qualitatively larger than the aggregation of individual rights; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The protection of individual rights could and does coexist with the denial of national rights. The growth of liberal democracy in Britain went hand in hand with the denial of the national rights and, therefore, the intensification of national oppression of the Scottish and Welsh nations by the English nation.

Predictably, English liberal democracy has not in any way made the Scottish and Welsh national liberation movements superfluous. On the contrary their resurgence conclusively proves that the existence or lack of liberal democracy is largely irrelevant for the origin and growth of such movements; for movements for external self-determination in Europe flourished in General Franco's fascist Spain (in Basque) as well in Queen Elizabeth's democratic Britain (in Scot-

land). They confirm that resistance to national oppression, that is, to the denial of national rights, is the principal motivating force of such movements.

The crucial importance of the British case lies in the fact that it reveals the fundamental incapacity of the liberal-democratic State to practice functional democracy, peddled by the US Government in Kosovo, to create intermediate political structures short of an independent State that could satisfy the political aspirations of minor nations within a multi-national State. It exposes functional democracy as a barren formula that seeks to popularise the groundless assumption that national liberation movements arise in Asia and Africa when minorities are denied their individual political and human rights.

But the British State, despite its democratic credentials, has by all accounts failed to create the hoped for functional democracy. It is virtually certain that the devolution of power effected in May 1999 through the election of the Scottish Parliament, re-constituted after almost three centuries, and the Welsh Assembly will serve as stepping stones to the full independence of the two nations. It would be ludicrous to expect Yugoslavia, which had savaged Bosnia Herzegovina, or the authoritarian post-colonial States in Asia and Africa, most of which practice ethnocide as a way of life, to succeed in realising functional democracy.

Ultimately, then, the United States conjured up functional democracy in a cynical manoeuvre to justify the political and military repression of the movements for external self-determination in Asia and Africa by criminalising them as terrorism that undermined the realisation of functional democracy by moderate political forces. The NATO's outlandish proposal to carve a protectorate out of Kosovo within Yugoslavia has

little to do with defending Kosovars; rather it is a manoeuvre to neutralise the movement for independence led by the KLA.

Nevertheless the practice of political democracy is important for a different reason, for the practice of democracy means recognising the freedom of choice of individuals and nations. The ruling classes of the North American and its Western European States have been compelled at least implicitly to recognise the right of external self-determination and accede to constitutional mechanisms (referenda in Quebec, Scotland and Wales) and intermediate power-sharing arrangements (Flemish/French Belgium) to facilitate the gradual, non-violent emergence of new nation-States. Some would argue that the growing demand for national self-determination articulated by Friesland in northern Netherlands is unlikely to be satiated with the internal form only.

The differential approach of the (western) international community to the demands for external self-determination in the West as opposed to those in Asia and Africa is only partly the result of the practice of democracy in the West. A geopolitical factor is that an increase in the number of States in the West shifts the balance of power within the global system of States to the advantage of the (western) international community, which hopes in this way to preserve its dominant position carved out during the colonial era. The message from Kosovo and the underlying proposition of functional democracy is that the international community will use whatever force necessary to freeze most, if not all, State borders in Asia and Africa (and in Muslim regions in Central Europe). irrespective of how and by whom they had been drawn; and that the US and NATO will crush national liberation movements irrespective of the human cost since they alter

the balance of world power to the disadvantage of the western States.

In short the international community seeks blindly to arrest internal de-colonisation and entrench the post-colonial status quo. Perhaps influential sections within it believe that State borders are God-given and permanent. But this self-delusion must surely have evaporated like the morning dew when the former Soviet Union imploded in the late 1980s or at the very least been brought into question by EUs experience of dissolving borders. The unfolding failure of NATOs intervention in Kosovo shows once again that neither time nor history is on the side of the international community.

About the Author: See page 229.