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Kosovo sets its sights on NATO

But the small country shouldn't rule out other options for security cooperation

For Kosovo, one of the youngest states in Europe, NATO membership has been at the top of its agenda since 2014.

To date, 112 of the 193 UN member states identify Kosovo as a state. However within the UN Security Council, China still refuses to give this recognition, as does Russia, which cites Kosovo's historic ethno-political conflict with Serbia.

There are also four NATO countries - Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain - which refuse to establish diplomatic ties with the government in Pristina, worried that this could persuade other minorities to strike out alone. Kosovo represents a historically unrecognised, excluded state, with no significant voice or participation rights on the international stage.

Both an internal study on enlargement commissioned by NATO in 1995, and 'Membership Action Plans' required of every prospective NATO candidate, define membership regulations with respect to politics, the economy, military, financial resources, security and law. But in contrast to the EU's stringent membership rules, NATO will not necessarily refuse to accept a country that fails to hit all of these markers. The crucial factor is whether the existing members believe a candidate country will contribute to the security and stability of the alliance.

Soon ripe, soon rotten

Unfortunately, Kosovo's record on government leadership and rule of law gives little room for optimism. The state is plagued by corruption, scoring a dismal 33 points on Transparency International's Corruption Index along with Moldova, Ethiopia and the Dominican Republic. A score of 100 indicates a country is "very clean". In a 2016 report, the European Commission deemed that Kosovo's judiciary "remains vulnerable to inappropriate political influence" while its institutions are "under-financed and under-staffed." A third of Kosovans report being

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Until now, the UN peacekeeping force, KFOR, has been responsible for national security. It answers to NATO, within the legal framework of the UN. The role of Kosovo's own army of 2500 soldiers and 800 reservists (the KSF) is limited to disaster response and some self-defence.

Army Minister Haki Demolli says he wants to transform the KSF into a credible military force. He believes a strong military would be a powerful symbol of Kosovo's sovereignty and boost its reputation on the world stage. The minister points out that NATO membership would require Kosovo to develop and modernise its own military, conforming to the alliance's standards. It would also free up UN soldiers currently stationed there at considerable expense.

Demolli's proposals include doubling number of professional soldiers to 5,000 and creating a special search and rescue mission unit that would participate in international UN and NATO deployments.

It is also doubtful that Kosovo can meet the financial demands of NATO membership. At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, member states committed to spend at least two percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defence. The KSF's budget in 2015 was 45.26 million euros, which equates to 0.79 per cent of the Kosovan GDP. The state is poor: Kosovans bring in 300 US dollars a month per head – just 30 percent of the world average.

Apart from Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo is recognised by all of the states in the West Balkans and has diplomatic relationships with each of them. In time, it may well be remembered as the last country from the Yugoslavian block to join the European Union. But accession is only likely if Belgrade and Pristina can learn to get on.

Should Kosovo join the EU, it is guaranteed 'help and support' from the other member states in case of an armed attack. In terms of security, an alliance with NATO seems superfluous.

US military strategy

But for Washington, Kosovo could prove a useful ally. It would form

another link in the chain of NATO members spanning the Adriatic and Mediterranean Coast. Slovenia, Croatia and Albania are already part of the US-led alliance, and Montenegro's membership is imminent.

Kosovo should not rule out other options for security cooperation. Rather than striving for full membership, Kosovo could follow the example of Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Finland and Ireland by participating in various aspects of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. It could offer a modernised KSF army for long-term UN peace missions. Such a provision of troops would surely lead to greater international recognition for Pristina, which in turn would invite outside protection.

For the Kosovan government these ideas are akin to a sticking-plaster on a gaping wound. Undeterred, it clings to the goal of NATO membership. For this it will need the backing of ten legislators from the Serbian minority, who all have close links with Belgrade. But with Serbia vowing to defend "every inch" of the territory it claims as its own, Serbia is in no mood to provide the necessary support.



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