

**THE NECESSITY AND EFFICIENCY OF NATO-LED INTERNATIONAL
PEACEKEEPING OPERATIONS IN KOSOVO AFTER 1999**

Abstract:	<i>On June 11th, 1999, NATO initiated the Kosovo Force (KFOR), a peacekeeping mission, in Kosovo, immediately following the ratification of UN Security Council Resolution 1244. At that juncture, the Yugoslav military forces were deeply embroiled in hostilities with the Kosovo Liberation Army, thereby precipitating a dire humanitarian crisis within Kosovo. The exodus of nearly a million individuals from Kosovo as refugees, a significant proportion of whom never returned to their homes, underscored the gravity of the situation. Subsequently, KFOR's mission centered on the establishment of a secure environment and the facilitation of unimpeded freedom of movement for all inhabitants across the entire expanse of Kosovo, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. This paper seeks to delineate whether the sustained presence of a permanent peacekeeping force within the region was a requisite imperative and whether it has engendered any salutary impacts on the broader spectrum of human security.</i>
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Introduction

The Yugoslav wars, which transpired throughout the 1990s, were characterized by profound racial animosities, economic devastation, and the eruption of civil conflict within the erstwhile Yugoslav territories and this period witnessed the reemergence of latent and simmering social and ethnic tensions that had previously been subjugated under the formidable and authoritarian governance of Yugoslavia. It was against this tumultuous backdrop that the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies found themselves compelled to intervene, as the global community bore witness, with a sense of dismay, to the harrowing episodes of violence unfolding in regions such as Bosnia and Kosovo.

In particular, the United States and its NATO partners executed airstrikes against Serbia, which had wielded the mantle of power within the former Yugoslav territories⁹⁷⁴. This Western intervention in Yugoslavia was code-named "Allied Force" and stands as a subject of considerable controversy, owing to the enduring questions surrounding the legal justification for NATO's bombing campaign from the perspective of international law.

Matters of International Law

In the late 20th century, the Balkans became a crucible of ethnic tensions, culminating in the Kosovo conflict of 1999. As the world witnessed the unfolding humanitarian crisis, the international community grappled with the complexities of intervention, legal principles, and the delicate balance between state

⁹⁷⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, *A Perfect Failure: NATO's War against Yugoslavia*, "Foreign Affairs", Vol. 78, No. 5, 1999, pp. 2-8

sovereignty and the responsibility to protect. The NATO bombings in Yugoslavia emerged as a controversial chapter, a narrative woven with diverse perspectives and a tapestry of stakeholders. The backdrop was one of deep-rooted ethnic strife in Kosovo, where Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic's oppressive policies⁹⁷⁵ had triggered a brutal response from the Kosovo Liberation Army. The escalating crisis gave rise to a moral imperative for intervention, setting the stage for the NATO airstrikes. Within the alliance itself, a nuanced discourse unfolded.

Proponents of the airstrikes, largely consisting of NATO member states, argued that their actions were a last resort in the face of failed diplomatic endeavors. They invoked the concept of the "responsibility to protect,"⁹⁷⁶ contending that intervention was necessary to prevent an impending humanitarian catastrophe. However, dissenting voices within NATO questioned the legality of the intervention, emphasizing the absence of explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council.

In Belgrade, the Yugoslav government vehemently opposed the NATO bombings, viewing them as an egregious violation of sovereignty and an affront to international law. Milosevic's regime painted the airstrikes as an act of illegal aggression, further inflaming tensions in the region. Beyond the immediate actors, global powers like Russia and China weighed in. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, they criticized the intervention⁹⁷⁷, citing concerns about a breach of international law and the undermining of principles such as state sovereignty.

The debate transcended national borders and diplomatic circles, drawing the attention of international legal scholars who offered a spectrum of interpretations, from critiques of illegality to justifications based on emerging norms of humanitarian intervention. Human rights advocates found themselves caught in a web of conflicting ideals. While many supported the intervention as a necessary response to the humanitarian crisis, others voiced concerns about the potential for civilian casualties resulting from the airstrikes. The legal controversy hinged on the interpretation of the UN Charter, with critics arguing that the use of force without explicit Security Council authorization violated the principle of non-intervention.

On the other side of the spectrum, supporters pointed to the evolving norm of humanitarian intervention and the emerging doctrine of the responsibility to protect. The legacy of the NATO bombings in Yugoslavia reverberates through the corridors of international law and geopolitics. The conflict prompted a reassessment of legal frameworks and ignited discussions on the need for clearer guidelines governing humanitarian interventions. It left an indelible mark on debates around the balance of national sovereignty and the need to prevent serious human rights violations.

As the story progresses, the conflict around NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia highlights the relationship between geopolitics, morality, and international law. Stories and views of different stakeholders demonstrate the challenges of balancing the principle of national sovereignty with the responsibility to protect people from gross human rights violations. The history of this chapter is complete, yet the narrative continues in the general debate about the evolution of international law in the face of humanitarian crises.

Background of the War

The Kosovo War, a seminal conflict that unfolded from 1998 to 1999 in the Balkans, bore the hallmarks of a protracted and intricate armed struggle involving the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, encompassing Serbia and Montenegro, and the ethnically Albanian population dwelling in the tumultuous province of Kosovo. This chapter in Balkan history was shaped by a confluence of historical, geopolitical, and socio-ethnic factors, which culminated in the eruption of hostilities in the late 20th century. The precipitating factors of the Kosovo War were deeply rooted in historical antecedents.

⁹⁷⁵ Julija Bogoeva, *From Lies to Crimes: The Milošević Switch from Communism to Nationalism as State Policy*, "FICHL Policy Brief Series", No. 19, 2014

⁹⁷⁶ ICCISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, "International Development Research Centre", Ottawa, 2001, <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/the-responsibility-to-protect-report-of-the-international-commission-on-intervention-and-state-sovereignty-2001/> (22.10.2023)

⁹⁷⁷ China&US Focus, *We Remember 1999 Very Well'- The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia and its Impacts on Sino-Russian Relations*, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/we-remember-1999-very-well--the-nato-bombing-of-the-federal-republic-of-yugoslavia-and-its-impacts-on-sino-russian-> (23.10.2023)

Kosovo, a historically significant region in the Balkans, held a complex historical legacy characterized by a juxtaposition of Serbian medieval statehood and the predominance of an indigenous ethnic Albanian population. The dissolution⁹⁷⁸ of the Yugoslav Federation in the early 1990s, marked by a series of ethnic fissures, further heightened the latent tensions surrounding Kosovo. The heavy-handed policies of the Yugoslav regime⁹⁷⁹, notably led by President Slobodan Milosevic, entailed the revocation of Kosovo's autonomous status, the suppression of Albanian cultural institutions, and pervasive political marginalization.

These policies engendered escalating discontent and catalyzed the rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)⁹⁸⁰, an Albanian guerrilla organization founded in 1998, with the express objective of securing independence from Serbian rule. The Kosovo War, in essence, transpired because of this multifaceted amalgamation of historical grievances, political repression, and the emergence of the KLA, which heralded a violent phase of the conflict. Commencing in 1998, the KLA embarked on armed confrontations with Yugoslav security forces, inciting the formal commencement of hostilities⁹⁸¹.

NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999 took place after numerous diplomatic efforts and negotiations. For example, there was the Rambouillet Agreement⁹⁸², and the negotiation process started with the Rambouillet Conference held in France in February 1999. The main aim was to bring together representatives of the Kosovo Albanian and Yugoslav delegations to discuss the solution of the problem. Known as the Rambouillet Agreement, its purpose was to create a temporary political framework that would guarantee Kosovo's independence while remaining within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, the negotiations ran into major obstacles due to the refusal of the Yugoslav delegation, led by President Slobodan Milosevic, to accept the deployment of NATO troops in Kosovo, which was the main aspect of the agreement. The conversation eventually reached an impasse. Furthermore, concurrent with the Rambouillet talks, various international actors engaged in diplomatic initiatives and mediation efforts to find a peaceful resolution. Key players included the Contact Group, comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, and Russia. The Contact Group worked to facilitate negotiations and urged both parties to reach a diplomatic settlement. The international community, represented by diplomats and envoys, engaged in shuttle diplomacy between Belgrade and Kosovo, seeking common ground and attempting to bridge the gaps in the negotiation process. These efforts aimed at finding a political solution to the Kosovo crisis without resorting to military intervention.

Nevertheless, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) played a pivotal role in diplomatic efforts. Discussions within the UNSC centered on the situation in Kosovo, and various resolutions were proposed to address the escalating conflict. However, the Council faced challenges in reaching a consensus due to differing views among its permanent members, particularly Russia and China, which expressed reservations about external intervention. Thus, diplomatic initiatives faltered in the face of intractable disputes, prompting the United States of America⁹⁸³ and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to intervene militarily⁹⁸⁴ in March 1999. NATO's aerial campaign, intended to quell the escalating violence in Kosovo, had the unintended consequence of triggering a massive humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians fled Kosovo, fearing retaliatory actions by Yugoslav forces. The war ultimately ended following 78 days of relentless NATO airstrikes. President Milosevic acceded to the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo, and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was established to govern the region⁹⁸⁵.

⁹⁷⁸ Florian Gârz, *Iugoslavia în flăcări*, Obiectiv, București, 1993, pp. 42-44

⁹⁷⁹ Misha Glenny, *Balkanii: Naționalism, Război și Marile Puteri 1804-2012*, Trei, New York, 2022, p. 340

⁹⁸⁰ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans in the New Millennium: In the Shadow of War and Peace*, Routledge, Londra, 2005, pp. 57-59

⁹⁸¹ Naser Sopjani, *Lufta e UÇK-së në Malësinë e Gollakut*, Bluetech, Pristina, 2012, pp. 61-74

⁹⁸² United Nations, *Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo (Rambouillet Accords)*, Paris, 1999, <https://peacemaker.un.org/kosovo-rambouilletagreement99> (27.10.2023)

⁹⁸³ Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, Trei, New York, 2019, p. 45

⁹⁸⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Does America need a Foreign Policy?*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001, pp. 111-117

⁹⁸⁵ Alexandros Yannis, *The UN as Government in Kosovo in Global Governance*, No. 1, 2004, pp. 67-81

In subsequent years, Kosovo embarked on a path towards independence, culminating in its declaration of sovereignty from Serbia in February 2008⁹⁸⁶, an event acknowledged by a significant number of nations, albeit disputed by Serbia and Russia. The Kosovo War reverberated with profound consequences that transcended the borders of the Balkans. Its foremost impact was a pronounced humanitarian toll, characterized by substantial loss of life, mass displacement, and considerable human suffering. This humanitarian dimension underscored the imperative of international intervention in conflicts characterized by egregious violations of human rights.

Moreover, the Kosovo War constituted an enduring chapter in the protracted dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation, perpetuating ethnic tensions that plagued the Balkans throughout the 1990s. The nature of the international intervention, notably NATO's intervention without explicit United Nations Security Council authorization⁹⁸⁷, engendered deliberation on the legitimacy and precedent of such actions in future international conflicts. The war's most profound consequence was the reconfiguration of Kosovo's political status.

The territory, which fell under the United Nations administration⁹⁸⁸, embarked on a trajectory towards statehood, culminating in its declaration of independence, a move that continues to be a subject of contention and unresolved dispute in the realm of international diplomacy. In a regional context, the Kosovo War cast a lingering shadow over Balkan stability and its intricate inter-state relations, as neighboring countries grappled with the repercussions of this watershed conflict. Thus, the Kosovo War, emblematic of a bygone era, endures as a historical pivot point, influencing the contours of contemporary Balkan politics and the global discourse on humanitarian intervention.

The Controversy Behind NATO's Intervention

The NATO bombings of Yugoslavia could not be entirely justified in terms of international law, which makes the Western participation in the country, code-named "Allied Force", a very contentious issue. Following the tragic events in Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo, numerous discussions have erupted. At the heart of this contentious issue was a mosaic of nuanced and interconnected factors, each adding layers to the polemical discourse that encapsulated the intervention.

A central point of contention revolved around the lack of explicit authorization⁹⁸⁹ from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for NATO's military intervention. International law has long held the UNSC as the arbiter of legitimacy in matters of military intervention, and the absence of its formal approval left many questioning the legal and moral underpinnings of the action. The principle of state sovereignty, a cornerstone of the Westphalian system, was thrust into the limelight, prompting debates about the permissibility of armed intervention within the borders of a sovereign state.

The intervention invoked a complex interplay between the concepts of humanitarianism and sovereignty⁹⁹⁰. Advocates of the action underscored its ethical justification, rooted in the burgeoning doctrine of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P)⁹⁹¹, positing that the international community bears a duty to protect civilians from severe harm when their government fails to do so.

⁹⁸⁶ Christopher Borgen, *Kosovo's Declaration of Independence: Self-Determination, Secession and Recognition*, "ASIL INSIGHT", 2008, pp. 4-5

⁹⁸⁷ Louis Henkin, *Kosovo and the Law of Humanitarian Intervention*, "The American Journal of International Law", Vol. 93, 1999, pp. 824-828

⁹⁸⁸ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo*, New York, 1999, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/275998> (24.10.2023)

⁹⁸⁹ Louis Henkin, *Kosovo and the Law of Humanitarian Intervention*, "The American Journal of International Law", Vol. 93, 1999, pp. 824-828

⁹⁹⁰ Radu Tabără, *Evoluția dreptului internațional umanitar în domeniul prevenirii și sancționării crimelor de război și a crimelor împotriva umanității*, Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare "Carol I", București, 2015, pp. 23-26

⁹⁹¹ ICCISS, *The Responsibility to Protect: the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, 2001, <https://www.globalr2p.org/resources/the-responsibility-to-protect-report-of-the-international-commission-on-intervention-and-state-sovereignty-2001/> (22.10.2023)

The scale and scope of the NATO airstrikes also came under intense scrutiny, as detractors alleged that the alliance's use of force was disproportionate and excessive.⁹⁹² The campaign's impact on Serbian civilian assets, including power facilities, bridges, and industrial installations, was derided as indiscriminate and contributory to civilian suffering⁹⁹³.

Furthermore, the intervention propagated divisions within the international community. While NATO member states were largely supportive of the intervention, non-NATO nations, notably Russia and China, vociferously condemned the military action as an encroachment upon Yugoslavia's sovereignty. This schism⁹⁹⁴ illuminated the intricate challenges of forging international consensus on intervention in internal conflicts.

Perhaps the most enduring and unresolved source of controversy lay in the aftermath of the intervention and the political quagmire surrounding the status of Kosovo. The subsequent governance of Kosovo by the United Nations, followed by its declaration of independence in 2008⁹⁹⁵ sowed the seeds of an enduring diplomatic dispute. Serbia adamantly refused to recognize Kosovo's sovereignty, and the broader international community remained deeply divided over the recognition of Kosovo's statehood, making it a lasting emblem of the Kosovo War's tumultuous legacy.

Thus, NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War ignited a firestorm of controversy. It raised profound questions surrounding the use of military force for ostensibly humanitarian purposes, the intricate balance between state sovereignty and the imperative of safeguarding human rights, and the role of international institutions, particularly when intervention transpired without the imprimatur of the UN Security Council⁹⁹⁶. The shadow of this controversy continues to cast a pall over the Kosovo issue and the overarching discourse on international interventions in internal conflicts.

The Kosovo Force Mission

The Kosovo Force mission represents a pivotal chapter in the multifaceted narrative of post-conflict peacekeeping and stabilization efforts within the Balkans. Established on June 11th, 1999, KFOR materialized as a robust and multi-national military presence, bearing the imprimatur of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization⁹⁹⁷. This peacekeeping mission was inaugurated in the aftermath of the Kosovo War, an acutely turbulent period in the Balkan region marked by protracted conflict and grievous humanitarian suffering⁹⁹⁸. At the time of KFOR's inception, Kosovo, a province within the former Yugoslavia, was ensnared in a perilous quagmire. The Kosovo Liberation Army, an ethnic Albanian insurgent group, had engaged in hostilities with Yugoslav military forces, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and a profound humanitarian crisis.⁹⁹⁹ The international community, alarmed by the escalating violence and eager to restore stability, invoked the mantle of multilateral intervention.

KFOR's mandate¹⁰⁰⁰ is multifaceted and multifarious. It was entrusted with the overarching responsibility of creating a secure and stable environment within Kosovo. This entailed the demilitarization of the region, the establishment of a safe and conducive atmosphere for the return of refugees and displaced persons, and the safeguarding of freedom of movement for all residents, irrespective of their ethnic origins. The mission also prioritized the protection of minority communities and critical infrastructure¹⁰⁰¹ while

⁹⁹² Ved Nanda, *Legal Implications of NATO's Armed Intervention in Kosovo*, "International Law Studies", Newport, 2000, p. 12

⁹⁹³ Tiberiu Costăchescu, Iuliana Neagoș, Iustin Vancea, *Pagini de politică și diplomație*, Techno Media, Sibiu, 2020, p. 75

⁹⁹⁴ Mark Webber, *The Kosovo War: A Recapitulation* "International Affairs", No. 3, 2009, pp. 447–459

⁹⁹⁵ Christopher Borgen, *Kosovo's Declaration of Independence: Self-Determination, Secession and Recognition*, "ASIL INSIGHT", 2008, pp. 4-5

⁹⁹⁶ Alexandros Yannis, *The UN as Government in Kosovo in Global Governance*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2004, pp. 67–81

⁹⁹⁷ NATO, Military Technical Agreement: Between the International Security Force ("KFOR") and the Governments of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 1999, <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/military-technical-agreement-between-international-security-force-kfor-and-governments> (23.10.2023)

⁹⁹⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *Victims and victors: reflections on the Kosovo War*, "Review of International Studies", No. 26, 2000, pp. 335–358

⁹⁹⁹ Naser Sopjani, *Lufta e UÇK-së në Malësinë e Gollakut*, Bluetech, Pristina, 2012, pp. 61-74

¹⁰⁰⁰ NATO, *Manualul NATO*, Washington, 2001, <https://www.nato.int/docu/handbook.htm> (26.10.2023)

¹⁰⁰¹ NATO, *NATO's role in Kosovo*, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48818.htm (21.11.2023)

overseeing the disarmament and disbandment of the KLA. The operative phase of KFOR was characterized by its pronounced multi-national composition, reflecting a diversity of troop-contributing nations under the aegis of the NATO alliance. These forces were tasked with implementing the mission's objectives while collaborating closely with the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)¹⁰⁰², which administered the civil governance of the region. Over time, KFOR evolved and adapted in response to changing circumstances and the shifting political landscape.

The mission witnessed a gradual reduction in troop numbers as security conditions improved, and the focus transitioned towards more comprehensive efforts related to institution-building, development, and the rule of law¹⁰⁰³. This transformation underscored KFOR's commitment to supporting the long-term stability and viability of Kosovo. However, the journey of KFOR has been marked by both successes and enduring challenges. The mission's presence has undoubtedly contributed to the mitigation of violence, the protection of minority communities, and the facilitation of the return of refugees. Yet, Kosovo remains a region fraught with political tensions and contested sovereignty, exemplified by the differing stances of Serbia, which does not recognize Kosovo's independence, and most Western nations that do.

In a broader context, the Kosovo Force mission serves as a critical case study in the intricate dynamics of peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilization efforts. It is emblematic of the complexities associated with bridging political divisions, facilitating reconciliation, and fostering enduring stability in regions recovering from protracted conflicts. The legacy of KFOR continues to resonate within the broader discourse on international intervention, state-building, and conflict resolution, offering both valuable lessons and persistent dilemmas for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners of peace and security. It has evolved into an indispensable and highly efficient instrument in maintaining peace and security within the complex and historically fraught region of Kosovo.

The Necessity and Efficiency of KFOR

The necessity and operational efficiency of KFOR in the Balkans are emblematic of the multifaceted challenges inherent in post-conflict environments and the critical role that international peacekeeping missions play in fostering stability, security, and reconciliation. The necessity of KFOR's continued presence within Kosovo derives from the complex and enduring challenges that persist in the aftermath of the Kosovo War, a protracted and brutal conflict marked by ethnic violence, displacement, and deep-seated historical animosities. The region remains a powder keg of unresolved political disputes and ethnic tensions¹⁰⁰⁴, making it susceptible to potential escalations of conflict.

The sovereignty issue, particularly with Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's statehood, remains a volatile diplomatic quandary that necessitates the mission's continuous role as a buffer and guarantor of stability. KFOR has been instrumental in averting a return to violence by serving as a deterrent and a reassuring presence to all parties involved¹⁰⁰⁵. Its mandate to establish a secure environment encompasses the prevention of inter-ethnic violence and the facilitation of freedom of movement for all residents, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. This critical role contributes not only to the physical security of the populace but also to the broader sense of confidence and well-being in Kosovo. Operational efficiency characterizes KFOR's ability to execute its mandate effectively. The mission's ability to control and mitigate violence, as well as its commitment to ensuring the security of minority communities, exemplify its success in maintaining a stable environment¹⁰⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁰² Alexandros Yannis, *The UN as Government in Kosovo* in *Global Governance*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2004, pp. 67–81

¹⁰⁰³ NATO, *Military Technical Agreement: Between the International Security Force ("KFOR") and the Governments of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 1999*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/military-technical-agreement-between-international-security-force-kfor-and-governments> (23.10.2023)

¹⁰⁰⁴ Tiberiu Costăchescu, Iuliana Neagoș, Iustin Vancea, *Pagini de politică și diplomație*, Techno Media, Sibiu, 2020, p. 75

¹⁰⁰⁵ European Western Balkans, *Is KFOR still guaranteeing stability and security in Kosovo?*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/12/17/kfor-still-guaranteeing-stability-security-kosovo/> (23.10.2023)

¹⁰⁰⁶ Urtak Hamiti, *NATO in Kosovo - KFOR mission, intentions, successes, failures*, "European Journal of Research in Social Sciences", Vol.3, No. 16, 2015, pp. 48-52

The demilitarization of the region, including the disarmament of the Kosovo Liberation Army and the disbandment of paramilitary groups, has significantly reduced the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, thereby promoting the rule of law. KFOR's protection of critical infrastructure, including bridges and power plants, preserves essential services and fosters socio-economic recovery¹⁰⁰⁷. This not only contributes to the immediate well-being of the population but also lays the groundwork for sustainable development and prosperity.

The mission's facilitation of freedom of movement is emblematic of its operational efficiency, exemplifying its commitment to building inclusive societies and enabling economic progress. This ensures that residents can traverse Kosovo unimpeded, thereby promoting social cohesion and broader economic integration. In conclusion, the necessity and efficiency of KFOR in Kosovo underscore the indispensable role of peacekeeping missions in post-conflict settings. The persistence of political and ethnic divisions, coupled with the sovereignty dispute, necessitates KFOR's continued presence as a guarantor of stability. The mission's operational efficiency, evidenced by its success in maintaining security, facilitating freedom of movement, and supporting demilitarization and infrastructure protection, is emblematic of the vital contributions that international peacekeeping missions make to peace, security, and reconciliation in conflict-affected regions. KFOR stands as a tangible testament to the international community's ongoing commitment to the stability and well-being of Kosovo and the broader Balkans.

Recent Escalations and Tensions in the Region

Kosovo has experienced various escalations and tensions since the end of the Kosovo War in 1999. For example, in March 2004, Kosovo witnessed a significant escalation of inter-ethnic violence. Riots broke out in several cities, primarily targeting Kosovo Serbs and their property. The unrest resulted in the displacement of thousands and widespread damage. KFOR was called upon to restore order and protect vulnerable communities¹⁰⁰⁸. Moreover, Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008 triggered a diplomatic escalation¹⁰⁰⁹. While many countries, including the United States and many EU member states, recognized Kosovo's independence, Serbia vehemently opposed it¹⁰¹⁰. The declaration and its aftermath led to diplomatic tensions and ongoing disputes.

Nevertheless, the period after Kosovo's independence declaration saw numerous political escalations and deadlocks within Kosovo's governance. Political infighting and frequent government collapses hindered the region's progress and created a climate of uncertainty. Kosovo's attempts to define and establish its borders have been a continuous source of tension. Disputes with neighboring countries¹⁰¹¹, particularly Serbia and Montenegro, have led to escalations in rhetoric and occasional flare-ups. In addition, inter-ethnic tensions and localized escalations have persisted, with sporadic incidents of violence and property damage. While not on the scale of the 2004 unrest, these incidents highlight the challenges in achieving lasting reconciliation between ethnic communities in Kosovo. Kosovo has experienced a series of political demonstrations and protests in response to various issues, including allegations of corruption, electoral disputes, and calls for government reform¹⁰¹². These protests occasionally escalate into clashes with law enforcement, posing challenges to stability¹⁰¹³.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Jason Fritz, *Stability Operations in Kosovo 1999-2000: A Case Study*, PKSOI, Carlisle, 2018, pp. 42-46

¹⁰⁰⁸ HRW, *Failure to protect: Anti-minority violence in Kosovo, March 2004*, Belgrade, 2004, <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/failure-protect-anti-minority-violence-kosovo-march-2004> (24.10.2023)

¹⁰⁰⁹ Christopher Borgen, *Kosovo's Declaration of Independence: Self-Determination, Secession and Recognition*, "ASIL INSIGHT", 2008 pp. 4-5

¹⁰¹⁰ Reuters, *U.S. and EU powers recognize Kosovo as some opposed*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-serbia-idUSHAM53437920080218/> (23.10.2023)

¹⁰¹¹ Leon Malazogu, Florian Bieber, Drilon Gashi, *The Future of Interaction Between Prishtina and Belgrade*, PER, Pristina, 2012, pp. 56-68

¹⁰¹² Crisis Group, *Behind the Renewed Troubles in Northern Kosovo*, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/behind-renewed-troubles-europe-balkans-northern-kosovo> (12.11.2023)

¹⁰¹³ European Western Balkans, *Is KFOR still guaranteeing stability and security in Kosovo?*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/12/17/kfor-still-guaranteeing-stability-security-kosovo/> (23.10.2023)

The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, facilitated by the European Union¹⁰¹⁴, has seen multiple escalations and setbacks. The European Union has played a pivotal role in mediating the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, addressing the complex historical and political issues stemming from Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. Under the guidance of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, negotiations have culminated in the 2013 Brussels Agreement¹⁰¹⁵, a significant milestone aiming to normalize relations. Monitoring the implementation of these agreements has become a focal point, with regular high-level meetings serving as platforms for progress evaluation and issue resolution. Emphasizing not only political dimensions but also the rule of law, human rights, and reconciliation, the EU seeks a comprehensive and lasting resolution. The prospect of EU accession serves as a powerful incentive for both Kosovo and Serbia, underlining the transformative potential of successful dialogue. Despite persistent challenges, the EU's patient diplomacy remains steadfast, navigating differing perspectives and historical complexities. This engagement reflects the EU's commitment to fostering stability and integration in the Western Balkans, presenting a compelling narrative of diplomatic resilience in the pursuit of regional peace.

Issues related to autonomy for the Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo, property rights, and the integration of the Serbian community have been sources of contention. These examples illustrate the complex and multifaceted challenges that Kosovo has faced in the post-conflict era. They also underscore the ongoing need for organizations like KFOR to help maintain peace, stability, and security in the region.

In 2021, Kosovo became embroiled in a significant and contentious issue revolving around license plates, which took center stage in the region's political and diplomatic landscape¹⁰¹⁶. The events concerning license plates had far-reaching implications and showcased the complexities and sensitivities inherent in Kosovo's ongoing quest for statehood and international recognition. The license plate controversy centered on Kosovo's endeavor to have its own unique license plate identifier, distinguishable from those of other nations or regions. For years, vehicles in Kosovo had been using license plates bearing the letters "RKS," which had become a symbol of Kosovo's aspiration for recognition as an independent and sovereign state.¹⁰¹⁷ Thus, in 2021, the government of Kosovo decided to replace the "RKS" identifier with "KS," a move intended to solidify Kosovo's identity and reinforce its claim to international statehood¹⁰¹⁸. The license plate issue had significant international visibility. For example, Serbia vehemently opposed Kosovo's move¹⁰¹⁹ to change the license plate identifier to "KS" and viewed it as a provocative assertion of Kosovo's independence, which Serbia does not recognize¹⁰²⁰. This disagreement underscored the ongoing diplomatic tensions between Kosovo and Serbia¹⁰²¹, which had yet to reach a comprehensive resolution regarding Kosovo's status.

The Kosovo Force played a crucial role in managing the situation from a security perspective. KFOR's mission is to maintain peace and stability in Kosovo, and the license plate controversy had the potential to incite tensions and escalations that could compromise the region's security¹⁰²². KFOR was tasked with monitoring and preventing any demonstrations, protests, or incidents related to the license plate issue from escalating into violence. The mission's presence was essential to ensuring that any potential inter-ethnic

¹⁰¹⁴ Uniunea Europeană, *Rezoluția Parlamentului European referitoare la Raportul Comisiei privind Kosovo pe 2021, Bruxelles, 2021*, [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=fr&reference=2021/2246\(INI\)](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?lang=fr&reference=2021/2246(INI)) (19.10.2023)

¹⁰¹⁵ The Government of the Republic of Serbia, *Бриселски споразум*, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/cinjenice/283757> (22.10.2023)

¹⁰¹⁶ Al Jazeera, *Kosovo's car licensing rule resisted by ethnic Serbs takes effect*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/1/kosovos-car-licencing-rule-resisted-by-ethnic-serbs-takes-effect> (20.10.2023)

¹⁰¹⁷ Council of Europe, *The situation in Kosovo and the role of the Council of Europe*, PACE website (coe.int) (23.10.2023)

¹⁰¹⁸ KoSsev, *Temporary RKS license plates: The origin story*, <https://kossev.info/temporary-rks-license-plates-the-origin-story/> (11.11.2023)

¹⁰¹⁹ DW, *Tensions at Kosovo-Serbia border over license plate rules*, <https://www.dw.com/en/kosovo-new-restrictions-on-serbian-license-plates-spark-protests/a-59246024> (19.10.2023)

¹⁰²⁰ Mihai Melintei, Cristina Deffert, *The problem of free movement of means of transport in the Transnistrian and Kosovo case* in "Anuarul Laboratorului pentru Analiza Conflictului Transnistrean", Vol. 6, No. 1, 2022, p. 67

¹⁰²¹ Leon Malazogu, Florian Bieber, Drilon Gashi, *The Future of Interaction Between Prishtina and Belgrade*, PER, Pristina, 2012, pp. 56-68

¹⁰²² Mihai Melintei, Cristina Deffert, *The problem of free movement of means of transport in the Transnistrian and Kosovo case*, "Anuarul Laboratorului pentru Analiza Conflictului Transnistrean", Vol. 6., No. 1, 2022, p. 65

disputes or clashes were swiftly addressed to maintain peace and stability in the region. KFOR's perspective on the events of 2021 in Kosovo was framed by the understanding that seemingly minor administrative matters, such as license plates, could have symbolic and political significance in a region where deep-rooted historical and political divisions persisted. The mission's efficiency lay in its ability to balance the protection of freedom of expression with the maintenance of order and security, thereby preventing the situation from deteriorating into violence or unrest.

The license plate controversy was emblematic of Kosovo's broader challenges as it sought to assert its identity and gain international recognition. The issue was a reminder of the unresolved political and diplomatic disputes in the region, particularly Kosovo's disputed status and Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty. Hence, KFOR's role in maintaining security and stability during such controversies underscored its importance as a stabilizing force in a region marked by historical tensions and ongoing political disputes. The license plate issue was a microcosm of the larger struggle for Kosovo's recognition and statehood, which continued to shape the region's dynamics and security landscape.

However, in 2023, the Kosovo region witnessed a substantial increase in tension and escalation. To begin with, on January 8th, NATO declined Serbia's proposal to deploy as many as 1,000 of its troops and military police to North Kosovo¹⁰²³. In addition, in the autumn of 2022, a crisis unfolded as Kosovo Serbs relinquished their positions within the local administration¹⁰²⁴. This¹⁰²⁵ came in response to Pristina's refusal to permit vehicles bearing Serbian license plates to traverse the northern region of Kosovo. The situation deteriorated, giving rise to street confrontations and a notable escalation in tensions, necessitating the intervention of the European Union¹⁰²⁶. Subsequently, Brussels issued stern warnings to the Kosovar authorities¹⁰²⁷, even considering the imposition of sanctions, to dissuade further exacerbation of the dispute with the Serbs.

In May 2023 Serbs in several predominantly Serb-inhabited localities in northern Kosovo opted to boycott the local elections. Consequently, these elections resulted in victories for ethnic Albanian candidates. Additionally, on May 29th, a total of twenty-five peacekeepers from the NATO-led Kosovo Force sustained injuries during confrontations with ethnic Serbs in North Kosovo, relating to the installation of ethnic Albanian mayors.¹⁰²⁸ In response to these clashes, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić elevated the Serbian Armed Forces to the highest level of combat readiness. Henceforth, on June 14th, Serbian authorities arrested three officers from the Kosovo Police, alleging their unlawful border crossing. The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, refutes these Serbian assertions, contending that the officers were detained while situated 300 meters within Kosovo's territory, and he calls for their prompt release¹⁰²⁹.

The Banjska attack¹⁰³⁰, which unfolded on the 24th of September 2023, marked a terrorist assault carried out by Serb militants against the Kosovo Police in the village of Banjska in North Kosovo. During the 23rd and 24th of September 2023, Serb militants launched an attack against Kosovo police officers who were

¹⁰²³ Politico, *Serbian request to deploy troops in Kosovo denied by NATO*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-denies-serbia-request-deploy-military-kosovo-aleksandar-vucic/> (22.10.2023)

¹⁰²⁴ Al Jazeera, *Kosovo-Serbia tensions: Mood on the ground, possible scenarios*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/29/kosovo-serbia-tensions-mood-on-the-ground-possible-scenarios> (18.10.2023)

¹⁰²⁵ Kosovo Online, *Serbët u larguan nga institucionet e Kosovës një vit më parë, 12 muaj krize pa asnjë tregues se diçka do të ndryshojë*, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/sq/lajm/politike/serbet-u-larguan-nga-institucionet-e-kosoves-nje-vit-me-pare-12-muaj-krize-pa-asnje> (12.11.2023)

¹⁰²⁶ Al Jazeera, *Serbia and Kosovo set for talks in Brussels amid tensions*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/17/kosovo-albanians-serbs-tense-ahead-of-talks-in-brussels>, (22.10.2023)

¹⁰²⁷ Paparaci, *Mos-marrëveshja në Bruksel mobilizon Kosovën, mbledhën Osmani, Konjufca e Sveçla*, <https://paparaci.com/242368/mos-marreveshja-ne-bruksel-mobilizon-kosoven-mbledhen-osmani-konjufca-e-svecla/> (22.10.2023)

¹⁰²⁸ Reuters, *NATO soldiers injured in Kosovo clashes with Serb protesters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-soldiers-deploy-around-kosovo-town-halls-standoff-with-serb-protesters-2023-05-29/> (24.10.2023)

¹⁰²⁹ Reuters, *Serbian security forces detain three Kosovo police officers, Kosovo official says*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbias-security-forces-detain-three-kosovo-police-officers-kosovo-official-says-2023-06-14/> (12.10.2023)

¹⁰³⁰ BBC, *Kosovo: Why is violence flaring between ethnic Serbs and Albanians?*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/62382069> (24.10.2023)

responding to a situation involving unregistered trucks obstructing a bridge in Banjska. Tragically, this incident resulted in the loss of Kosovar sergeant Afrim Bunjaku, posthumously honored with the Hero of Kosovo distinction.¹⁰³¹

Subsequently, the attackers sought sanctuary within the Banjska Monastery¹⁰³², which was eventually retaken by the Kosovo Police. During this operation, three militants were fatally wounded, and a substantial cache of weaponry was seized. Eight individuals were apprehended, with four of them later being released. It is worth noting that Milan Radoičić, the Vice-president of the Serb List, was implicated and subsequently admitted to responsibility for the attack, leading to his subsequent arrest¹⁰³³.

Following the attack, Kosovo, in collaboration with Albania, the European Union, and various other nations, issued strong condemnations. The Assembly of Kosovo not only decried the incident but also called for an international investigation into the potential involvement of the Serbian state, stressing the need for appropriate measures by Western nations. Furthermore, the increased deployment of Serbian military forces along the Kosovo border prompted widespread regional concern, prompting calls for de-escalation and the reinforcement of NATO deployments. Kosovo made allegations of Serbian state complicity, substantiating these claims with evidence of training activities conducted on Serbian territory. Concurrently, the Kosovo Intelligence Agency confirmed reports of a Serbian military base under construction near the border.¹⁰³⁴

Following those events, on September 25th, Kosovo Police, utilizing armored vehicles, entered the village of Banjska in North Kosovo. This move occurred a day following an attack on the village by armed individuals¹⁰³⁵. Considering the recent developments, a contingent of over 130 additional troops from Romania¹⁰³⁶ arrived in Kosovo on the 13th of October to bolster NATO's Kosovo Force peacekeeping mission. This deployment supplements the two hundred British soldiers who were sent earlier in October. The decision to increase troop numbers was prompted by the violent attack on Kosovo Police that transpired on September 24, along with escalating tensions in the region¹⁰³⁷.

Conclusions

All in all, the NATO-led international peacekeeping operations in Kosovo after 1999 have proven to be a crucial and enduring force in maintaining peace, security, and stability in a region marked by historical conflicts and ethnic tensions. The necessity for such operations became evident in the aftermath of the Kosovo War, with the international community recognizing the importance of preventing a resurgence of violence and safeguarding the rights and safety of all residents, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. These missions, prominently represented by the Kosovo Force, have played a pivotal role in facilitating the return of displaced populations, demilitarization efforts, and the establishment of a secure environment.

The efficiency of these operations, as demonstrated over the years, lies in their adaptability to changing circumstances and their ability to manage various escalations and challenges. They have navigated complex political transitions, the declaration of Kosovo's independence, and ongoing disputes with Serbia. Furthermore, these missions have effectively responded to local conflicts and crises, such as the Banjska attack in 2023, maintaining peace and security even in the face of emerging tensions. While challenges persist, and the Kosovo issue remains unresolved, the continued presence of NATO-led peacekeeping operations reflects

¹⁰³¹ Alfapress, *Killed in the line of duty, Sergeant Afrim Bunjaku is declared a hero of Kosovo*, <https://alfapress.al/english/kosova-bota/u-vra-ne-krye-te-detyres-rreshteri-afrim-bunjaku-shpallet-hero-i-kos-i79030> (23.10.2023)

¹⁰³² Al Jazeera, *Kosovo monastery siege ends following deadly attack on police*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/24/one-police-officer-killed-in-kosovo-attack-blamed-on-serbia> (22.10.2023)

¹⁰³³ Balkan Insight, *Kosovo Serb Kingpin Radoicic Takes Responsibility for Weekend Shootout*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/09/29/kosovo-serb-kingpin-radoicic-takes-responsibility-for-weekend-shootout/> (23.10.2023)

¹⁰³⁴ KOHA, *Musliu: Serbia is building a new military base near the border with Kosovo*, <https://www.koha.net/en/ktv-evening-news/394069/Mosliu%2C-Serbia-is-building-a-new-military-base-near-the-border-with-Kosovo/> (20.10.2023)

¹⁰³⁵ Daily Sabah, *Kosovo police enter northern village after shootout kills 4*, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/europe/kosovo-police-enter-northern-village-after-shootout-kills-4>, (22.10.2023)

¹⁰³⁶ Radio Free Europe, *Romania Sends Reinforcements To KFOR In Kosovo, Says NATO*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-kfor-romanian-reinforcements-nato/32637314.html> (23.10.2023)

¹⁰³⁷ Radio Free Europe, *Romania Sends Reinforcements To KFOR In Kosovo, Says NATO*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-kfor-romanian-reinforcements-nato/32637314.html> (23.10.2023)

the ongoing necessity of international involvement in post-conflict regions. These missions stand as a testament to the international community's dedication to Kosovo's well-being and serve as a cornerstone of security and stability in the region. As Kosovo continues to navigate its complex path toward reconciliation, statehood, and broader recognition, the importance of NATO-led peacekeeping operations in the region remains undeniably vital. They promise a more stable and secure future for the people of Kosovo and the Balkans, and their significance should not be underestimated.

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