

# ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

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## Kosovo Security Force: Quo Vadis?

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On September 10, 2012, the International Civilian Representative for Kosovo (ICR), Pieter Feith, announced at a press conference that Kosovo's supervised independence by the International Steering Group for Kosovo (ISG), pursuant to the Ahtisaari Plan, was over. The end of Kosovo's supervision by the international community was undoubtedly an important milestone for the youngest country in the Balkans, and was hailed by Kosovar Prime Minister, Hashim Thaci, as a sign that Kosovo had gained a great deal of trust and respect in the international community. However, in the wake of its unsupervised policy making, Kosovo still has many serious problems to deal with, both internally, and in relation to its neighboring countries. Some of the most pressing issues stem from the ongoing debate on NATO's future presence in Kosovo, and the quest for a new status for the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF).

The KSF was formally created in January 2009, under the provisions of the Ahtisaari Plan and within the wider context of the ongoing security sector reform in Kosovo; it became operationally active in September 2009. Operating under the supervision of NATO's KFOR, the KSF was established as a professional, uniformed, and minimally armed body, designed to represent the multi-ethnic composition of Kosovo's society, and was placed under democratic, civilian control. The mandate of the KSF drew heavily from that of its predecessor, the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), a civil emergency response unit that was created in 1999 by the UN and NATO missions in Kosovo, in order to facilitate the effective reintegration of the former Kosovo Liberation Army combatants into the country's post-conflict society. Within this framework, the Ahtisaari Plan authorized the KSF to conduct crisis response operations in Kosovo and abroad, civil protection operations within Kosovo, and to assist the civil authorities in responding to natural disasters and other emergencies. Other functions of the KSF include search and rescue operations, explosive ordnance disposal, the control and clearance of hazardous materials, fire-fighting, and other humanitarian assistance tasks. However, the Ahtisaari Plan failed to determine what the future of the KSF would be in the wake of Kosovo's international supervision, allowing for the development of an ongoing debate on this issue.

There has been heated debate on the KSF since the beginning of 2013, which is regarded in both Kosovo and abroad as the year that a major decision could be made regarding the KSF's future development. June of 2013 will mark the end of the imposed restrictions on the KSF by the Ahtisaari Plan, and thus Kosovo will be able to formally initiate a review process of the KSF and begin considering various alternatives for its future, one of which will be upgrading the KSF to a fully operational, and properly armed National Kosovo Army.

In anticipation of June 2013, the directives from inside Kosovo are very clear. The current administration holds that since the declaration of Kosovo's independence in 2008, Kosovo has seen major improvement in the area of security, and has been fully compliant with the directives and regulations set by the ISG. In short, Kosovo is under the impression that the international community has promised to reward their commitment to the implementation of the Ahtissari Plan, by gradually allowing Kosovo to assume full responsibility for their own security and defense. Yet, as there initially was no specified timeframe for the transfer of responsibilities from NATO to the government of Kosovo, there has been a growing consensus in Kosovo since the end of the country's supervised independence that this transfer should take place sooner, rather than later. The Minister of Security Forces, Agim Ceku, has publicly advocated for this cause, claiming repeatedly since early 2013 that "this is going to be the year of the Kosovo Army."

## Kosovo Security Force: Quo Vadis?

Moreover, in Kosovo, the political opposition exercises considerable pressure on Thaci's government to take the initiative to declare a unilateral transformation of the KSF into the Kosovo Army before the end of 2013. Among the opposition parties, Vetëvendosje appears to be the most assertive, arguing that the KSF should have already been declared a national army, and calling repeatedly over the last year for the government in Kosovo to do so immediately, instead of waiting for June 2013. This rhetoric, used by the political opposition, and by many who support Thaci's government, is one that builds on both symbolic and realistic arguments. On the symbolic level, Kosovo's lack of a fully operational national army is perceived as an obstacle towards the consolidation of the country's sovereignty; the army is an integral element of every independent state, as it is the means of establishing and exercising authority over sovereign territory. In reality, the lack of a national army has a more significant implication for Kosovo; despite the claim of sovereignty and independence, the country is not able to take full responsibility of its own security and, consequently, remains considerably dependent on NATO's presence on the ground.

However, the strong rhetoric currently in favor of the KSF's transformation into the Kosovo Army within the year seems to be at odds with the intentions of NATO; in fact, for the time being, NATO does not seem ready, or willing, to authorize and support this transformation. However, that does not mean the Alliance does not acknowledge the significant improvement that has taken place in Kosovo since 2008 regarding security, and the high level of compliance and cooperation of the KSF with KFOR. Establishing a national army for Kosovo though, raises serious concerns for NATO regarding the future relationship of this new army with the Alliance. At NATO's headquarters in Brussels, there is a clear consensus that NATO will seek to maintain and prolong its relationship with the KSF beyond June 2013, aiming to postpone the transformation of the KSF into an army to sometime in the future. NATO officials, in interviews with ELIAMEP, describe the desired scenario for the Alliance as follows: Kosovo will abstain from a unilateral declaration of a national army, and the KSF will maintain its current status and mandate even after June 2013. The operational capabilities of the KSF will remain under the oversight of KFOR, and under no circumstances will they exceed the agreed upon limitations that currently stand under Kosovo's Law on the KSF. In return, NATO appears willing to issue a public declaration, which will certify that the KSF has reached its Full Operational Capabilities (FOC) and will be ready in the future to assume more responsibility in providing security in Kosovo. Moreover, NATO will establish a Liaison Advisory Team (LAT) to serve as the link between NATO and the KSF. This will monitor and advise the latter in order to prepare for its transformation into an army when NATO and the Kosovar government agree it is appropriate.

Though contrary to NATO's desired scenario, the Alliance's internal assessment of the KSF situation continues to raise concerns for upcoming developments, especially after June 2013. NATO officials predict that within 2013, Thaci's administration will attempt to step forward and declare the unilateral transformation of the KSF into the Kosovo Army, as a result of Kosovo's security sector review, which is currently in progress. Based on information coming from Kosovo, NATO estimates that there is a strong likelihood that the pressure from the opposition on the current administration, coupled with the vibrant rhetoric of political actors such as Agim Ceku, will eventually bear fruits and the KSF will be unilaterally transformed into the Kosovo Army. This prediction sharply contrasts with NATO's public assessment of the relations between the KSF and KFOR, which emphasizes the high level of cooperation between the two structures, and the remarkable level of the KSF's compliance with NATO's directions and advice. Therefore, in the eyes of the public, the Alliance does not consider the possibility of a unilateral declaration of Kosovo's Army, and thus no measures have yet been taken in anticipation of such developments. Essentially, this means that NATO's response to a potential unilateral establishment of a national army by Kosovo will be decided by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) on an ad hoc basis, and will only come as a reaction to such an act.

It should be noted that NATO's military advisors have already concluded that the KSF has reached its FOC. However, the Alliance will not declare this publicly in order to pressure the Thaci administration to prevent an imminent unilateral declaration of the Kosovo Army; essentially, as long as NATO does not confirm the FOC of the KSF,

## Kosovo Security Force: Quo Vadis?

the latter remains formally dependent on the authority of KFOR under the provisions of the Ahtisaari Plan, and any decisions for its future have to be taken with NATO's consent. Consequently, the declaration of the KSF's FOC before the end of June 2013 would be the best-case scenario for Kosovo. This way, NATO would formally acknowledge that the operational capabilities of the KSF have reached the previously agreed upon levels, and thus, the Kosovar government would be free to decide independently the future of the KSF. The formal reason for NATO holding back on declaring the KSF's FOC is that NATO and the current Kosovar government have not yet reached an agreement on the political framework that will ensure and regulate their relationship after the FOC has been declared. Thus, NATO officials have stated that until such an agreement is reached, the Alliance will not issue such a declaration, for fear of forfeiting overseeing future developments concerning the KSF.

Given NATO's current reservations to authorize and support an imminent transformation of the KSF into the Kosovo Army, Thaci's administration should carefully consider the implications of a unilateral decision on Kosovo. More precisely, the unilateral establishment of the Kosovo Army could affect:

- *Kosovo's relations with NATO.* As previously mentioned, NATO has not drafted any particular measures in response to the hypothetical scenario of the transformation of the KSF into a national army within 2013. Gauging NATO's reaction will be tricky, and the possibility that the Alliance decides to take a hard stance against the new Kosovo Army could have devastating consequences for Kosovo. NATO officials in Brussels comment that the relationship between the Kosovo Army and the Alliance will be considered on an entirely new basis, where the smooth relations of the KSF and KFOR in the past will have only marginal importance. A unilateral transformation of the KSF means that NATO – which includes four countries that still do not recognize Kosovo – would re-evaluate all of its commitments to, and relations with, Kosovo, a development that could possibly hurt Kosovo's national interests.
- *Kosovo's relations with Serbia.* The recent agreement between Serbia and Kosovo is expected to greatly improve relations between the two sides and is clear evidence of mutually growing trust and respect between Belgrade and Pristina. However, a unilateral declaration of an army by Kosovo could be easily understood as an act of bad faith, and could trigger unpredictable reactions from Serbia and may undermine the expected benefits from the progress in the Serbia-Kosovo talks.
- *Kosovo's internal stability.* More than a decade since NATO's intervention in Kosovo, and five years since the country's declaration of independence from Serbia, Kosovo's internal stability is often challenged by incidents of public unrest, especially in the Serbian enclaves in Northern Kosovo. The Serbian citizens of Kosovo continually defy the administrative authority of Pristina, and prefer to live under the parallel Serbian-backed institutions. It is easily understood that the creation of the Kosovo Army will be met with significant objections from the Serbian minority, and drawing from events in the past, the situation could potentially escalate to violence. For the already troubled region of Northern Kosovo, the establishment of the Kosovo Army in 2013 would only mean more trouble.

All in all, the upcoming developments regarding the future of the KSF are anticipated by the international community with great concern. Information and signals from Kosovo lead many to the conclusion that the Thaci administration may attempt to unilaterally transform the KSF into a fully equipped national Kosovar Army. In the event that such a unilateral initiative is taken any time after June 2013, Prime Minister Thaci needs to be fully aware of its negative implications that could undermine Kosovo's credibility as a cooperative team player in the international community. Fearing these implications, current Kosovo officials have tried to counterbalance any negative impression of Kosovo in the international community, and especially within NATO. Most recently, the Kosovar Minister of Foreign Affairs, Enver Hoxhaj, during a visit in Athens, emphasized that Kosovo desires to continue its successful cooperation with NATO, and that the Thaci administration will make no unilateral decisions that could potentially alienate its international

## Kosovo Security Force: Quo Vadis?

supporters. Along the same line, Agim Ceku claimed that while the process of establishing the Kosovo Army is ongoing and permanent, it needs to be carried out with the support of NATO, in this way, attempting to moderate the intensity of his earlier statements, in which he publicly reassured Kosovar Albanians that 2013 “is going to be the year of the Kosovo Army.” In short, the dilemma for the current administration in Kosovo is a great one; while the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's national army will clearly solidify Thaci's internal legitimization, such a decision will unquestionable deteriorate Kosovo's external relations, possibly even with its most significant international supporter, the US. At the same time, Kosovo's alignment with NATO's plan, while been a safe path towards wider international recognition, threatens to undermine Thaci's power internally, as being hesitant to claim assertively Kosovo's right to its own national army. Which scenario will eventually play out remains still to be seen in the coming months. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that any future decision regarding the future of the KSF could crucially influence the consolidation of Kosovo's international status.

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