While the world’s attention has been fixed upon upheavals in Arab societies and efforts to stem the contagion from Greece’s financial malaise, wounds that faded from the public gaze have festered. In Kosovo, tension between the ethnic Serbian minority and ethnic Albanian majority threatens renewed violence and imperils the integration of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic institutions. The situation is likely to worsen if Washington does not reengage on behalf of reconciliation. Though the US foreign policy agenda is robust, the Obama administration should intensify its commitment to peace in Kosovo by taking a fresh look at the protracted differences in the dispute.

As of early December 2011, many roads through Serb-populated northern Kosovo remained blocked by citizens protesting the perceived partiality of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) toward Kosovo’s ethnic Albanian government and its claim to independence. This standoff, which began in July when Serbs refused to permit ethnic Albanian officials to operate customs stations along the boundary between Kosovo and Serbia, has claimed lives and threatens to reignite if tensions are not allayed. The wounding of NATO peacekeepers during an attempt to dismantle the barricades prompted a flurry of diplomacy aiming at a short-term compromise before the December 8-9 EU summit at which Serbia’s bid for candidacy was to be discussed.

The unrest over the customs stations is but a proximate manifestation of deeper inter-group misunderstandings that US policy has not adequately addressed. The Bush administration treated Kosovo’s independence as an endgame for US policy in the region. This was the justified result of ethnic Albanians’ Western-backed resistance to an atrocious campaign of targeted violence by the regime of former Yugoslav strongman Slobodan Milosevic. The Obama administration, meanwhile, has been focused on events elsewhere. As a result, US policy toward Kosovo has essentially functioned

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on auto-pilot since 2008, hardly venturing beyond standard, limited rhetoric about the importance of pluralistic democracy.

Washington’s grand strategy for the region is clear. The US aims to consolidate liberal democracy in all the independent states of the Western Balkans and anchor them to Euro-Atlantic institutions for the purposes of stability and development. The deadlock over northern Kosovo, however, reveals that policies supporting Washington’s long-term objectives require attention. Recognizing that peace remains elusive in Kosovo, policymakers should reinvigorate dialogue between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs while thinking creatively about arrangements for guaranteeing minority rights and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

Most fundamentally, any settlement between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo is likely to arise under the aegis of Belgrade’s European integration. Furthermore, the US strategy of bringing Western Balkan states into the Euro-Atlantic community will face difficulties as long as an ethnic and territorial dispute continues to divide Serbia and Kosovo. Despite the fact that Serbian public support for EU membership has declined in recent years, Belgrade is likely to receive EU candidate status in 2012. Kosovo, on the other hand, does not even enjoy universal diplomatic recognition among EU and NATO members. This fact, in combination with nascent pluralistic self-government in Pristina, complicates Kosovo’s prospects for accession by putting any eventual Kosovar bid for EU membership years behind Serbia’s. In response to this challenging state of affairs, Washington must recognize that Kosovo’s dependence on international missions to ensure domestic tranquility and the rule of law is ultimately incompatible with the country’s self-sustaining participation in Euro-Atlantic structures.

To enhance Kosovo’s chances for peace, Washington should attempt to bolster its credibility as an objective, if not neutral, broker in the dispute. Reflexively dismissing the legitimate concerns of responsible Serbian leaders like Boris Tadic, Mirko Cvetkovic, and Vuk Jeremic out of revulsion at the crimes of a despot these men overthrew and brought to justice hardly sends the right signal. Recognizing that stability and peace in the Western Balkans depend upon Euro-Atlantic integration, which will not be completed until the dispute between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo is resolved, Washington should leverage its partnership with the Kosovar government to develop compromise proposals on customs enforcement and autonomy that will be acceptable to Serbs in northern Kosovo.

It is not naïve to envision a future in which both Serbs and Albanians enjoy reputations for respecting minority rights and participating in the same international institutions. The narrative of “ancient ethnic hatreds” is hackneyed and vapid, a product of collective laziness in the American media. A rigorous and intellectually honest examination of Balkan history shows that nationalisms in this region are mutable, that elites play a crucial role in defining them, and that local security dilemmas, rather than abstract animosities, drive the tragic cycles of violence that sunder ties of understanding and cooperation between ethnic groups within shared communities. Understanding this much, Washington should recommit itself to bringing Serbs and Kosovo Albanians toward reconciliation and a prosperous, dignified future. 

— Kacie Miura served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.