



THE international system that has brought unprecedented prosperity to the world since 1945 is based on rules that apply without exception. This system is supposed to protect the basic, legitimate national interests of every country, whether rich or poor, strong or weak. Its binding principles include the sovereign equality of states, the respect for the territorial integrity and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders.

Yet on Feb. 17, the Serbian province of Kosovo , which has been under United Nations administration since 1999, unilaterally declared independence from my country. This illegal act has, unfortunately, been recognized by the Bush administration and some European countries including Britain , France and Germany . Others in Europe — including Greece , Romania and Spain — have withheld recognition, as have most other leading global and regional players, including Brazil , China , Egypt , India , Israel , Russia and South Africa .

As things stand, the number of countries that will recognize an independent Kosovo will plateau at around 40, leaving it unrecognized by a vast majority of the close to 200 members of the United Nations. This includes, of course, the Republic of Serbia .

A peaceful demonstration of close to half a million people in Belgrade last week condemned this act of illegal secession. Unfortunately, a few hundred hooligans attacked several embassies, including that of the United States , and looted stores; they even attacked my ministry. Our government has condemned these acts, and will prosecute the offenders.

The case against recognition is based not only on the Security Council's 1999 resolution reaffirming Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo, but also founded on the view that the international system has, as a result of this hostile act by the Kosovo Albanians, become more unstable,

more insecure and more unpredictable.

Here's why. Recognizing the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence from Serbia legitimizes the doctrine of imposing solutions to ethnic conflicts. It legitimizes the act of unilateral secession by a provincial or other non-state actor. It transforms the right to self-determination into an avowed right to independence. It legitimizes the forced partition of internationally recognized, sovereign states.

It violates the commitment to the peaceful and consensual resolution of disputes in Europe . It supplies any ethnic or religious group that has a grievance against its capital with a playbook on how to achieve its ends. It even resurrects the discredited cold-war doctrine of limited sovereignty.

A historical injustice is being imposed on a European country that has overcome more obstacles since we democratically overthrew Slobodan Milosevic in October 2000 than most other nations have in a much longer time. Recognizing Kosovo means saying, in effect, that Serbian democracy must be punished because a tyrant — one who committed heinous deeds against the Kosovo Albanians in the 1990s — was left unpunished. Such misplaced revenge may make some feel better, but it will make the international system feel much worse.

To act out of a false moral imperative to right a supposed historical wrong will contribute neither to international security nor to the region's prospects of European Union membership. It is time to take a step back and examine the damage done.

If we can find a creative way to step back from the abyss that is Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, we could not only salvage the credibility of the international system, but even strengthen it through a re-commitment to its basic principles. Some will say that it's too late to put the genie back in the bottle. I don't believe that's true, because it's never too late to forge a prosperous future for all stakeholders to share.

What is absolutely certain is that trust needs to be rebuilt and values must be reaffirmed. The way forward lies in coming together and securing an agreement between the two parties: a negotiated, compromise solution to Kosovo's future status that addresses the legitimate right to broad self-governance for Kosovo's Albanians, while preserving a democratic Serbia that is

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whole and free, integrated into Europe, and engaged with a world set aright through prudent statecraft.

The legitimacy of the international system hangs in the balance.

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