

The Long Road to Solving International Problems

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Let me join others in saying what a pleasure it is to be at this peace summit. You know, peace has been very difficult to achieve. In some ways it's something we all dreamed of, but now we understand that peace isn't just the absence of war. It represents a kind of structure of relations between people, a structure of how one respects different points of view, what one can do to make a more stable and just world and a basis, a foundation, for the prosperity that we all seek for our children and beyond.

It has especially not been easy in the Western Balkans. When I came to Albania for the first time in 1991... That's only twenty-eight years ago but it seems like a much longer time. There was a system of governance that was in many different countries where one group thought they had a monopoly on all thoughts and on how humankind should implement all their interests. Well, we now know that peace depends on different people coming together and respecting each other.

Peace is complicated, hard to achieve

I think dedicating oneself to peace, though, offers no refuge for those in need of instant gratification. After all, it takes a long time to form these structures and to systematize this respect for each other. I have heard many times in the past -- one probably hears it today -- that somehow people say... in the Western Balkans, people have been fighting for thousands of years. You often hear that. And surely they are not going to be able to rise above that. Well, that is clearly, demonstrably, untrue. The people of the Balkans have risen about that and they have put together a community that I think is the envy of many parts of the world, still unable to put together that sense of community.

Facing reality about a united Europe

Now what we see in the Balkans is a desire to be part of something even better and that is a united Europe, a Europe that is united, that is whole, that is free and that is prosperous. I know and I think everyone here knows of the disappointment that EU succession negotiations will somehow be postponed. I personally, as someone who worked in this region for many years, feel that disappointment, but I think it's important to realize that while the road forward is clear and continues to be passable, it will have problems. There will be twists and turns and there will be challenges ahead.

The Western Balkans will reach their goal

So the issue is not to celebrate the challenges but rather to understand the task ahead, to overcome the

challenges and not be stopped and not be stymied. I have a great deal of confidence that this journey that the people of the Western Balkans have been on, a journey that has taken them through difficult times, is a journey that will not stop until the objectives are met.

I have no doubt that there cannot be a Europe whole and free unless all the countries of the Western Balkans are in that Europe, whole and free. I am optimistic that this process will continue, and I think the best thing for the peoples of the region is to act as if the journey has been completed. That is, act as if you are already European Union members. Don't say, we will begin to observe those standards once we're in the European Union. Start now and observe those standards now. I think that this is a mind-set that has worked in terms of NATO. I know that for Albania, if I had stood in front of an audience here in 1991 and I had said, Well, you will soon be in NATO, I don't think a lot of people would have believed me. And yet, look at the extraordinary progress. And how did Albania do that? In fact, how did North Macedonia do that? The answer is that they accepted a reform process through their military, through civilian control of the military, through a certain mind-set that the military achieved, through working together with other NATO countries. I think the fact of the matter is that these countries had become NATO members even before they were conferred as NATO members.

So the task ahead, I think is very clear and it should not be slowed down by any of the challenges ahead. I would ask, too, that the people of the Western Balkans (and of course that is the purpose of this meeting -- to discuss the challenges) but I would ask some of our Albanian friends and our Macedonian friends and others to understand that there are people from other parts of the world here who are looking for answers, looking for solutions to (I think) very challenging problems in their own part of the world.



From left: Albin Kurti, member of Parliament in Kosovo; US Ambassador Christopher Hill; Vasilika Hysi, deputy chair of the Parliament in Albania; and Talat Xhaferi, chair of the National Assembly in North Macedonia all spoke during the Opening Session

The situation could be worse

I used to think when I was in the Balkans that there was nothing more difficult in the world than the problems confronting the Balkans, but that was before I went to Korea and I dealt with the North Korean situation. It is a terrible tragedy what has happened in Korea. The people of Korea had nothing to do with the division of Korea, nothing to do with the establishment of this very (sort of alien) political and economic culture that was created in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. These were all concepts that were (frankly) introduced by others into the Korean Peninsula. So you can imagine the tremendous frustration of people who should have had -- who are historically entitled to -- their unification and yet cannot be unified because of the situation in North Korea.

So I would ask people in the Balkans to understand some of these issues better, because I want to make sure that as we go forward, in this one world of ours, that people are better understanding what goes on on the other side of this one world.

You know, I thought nothing could be worse than the division of the Korean Peninsula. And then I went to Iraq. I was ambassador in Baghdad, and I saw the extraordinary problems there of having governance, of having a system which had a sense of tolerance. The brutality of these wars was such that it was utterly frightening to the people of Iraq and to their sense of what could possibly be their future when you have this kind of brutality around you. It really turned brutal. So again, I would ask the people of the Balkans to understand that there are other issues going on such as those in the Middle East, which are frankly even worse than some of the problems we've encountered in the Balkans.

Solutions are possible

I think we all need to be inspired not only by our own example but by the example of others who are trying to deal with what for them are even more difficult problems. I think an important aspect of diplomacy and if we could call all of us here ambassadors, an important aspect of diplomacy is to listen to others. That is, to spend more time listening than you do talking, because when you are listening, you are absorbing information, you are absorbing knowledge and you are creating wisdom. So spend some time listening to other people and try to understand them. I'm thinking of a central point, which is that every country is unique and no country can impose its uniqueness on another country but at the same time I think we need to know that a lot of these problems have happened all over the world and that the problems and therefore the solutions are not necessarily unique. So, I think this is an excellent opportunity to come together at this historic moment.

I would be remiss if I were not honest enough to say to you that we have problems in the United States, too. A lot of problems... and we will deal with them. I want people to understand that as difficult as it has been for us at times, we will find solutions after we've tried every other alternative, but we will get to solutions in our country as well. I think ultimately we all have to understand that we depend on ourselves but we also need to depend on each other and we need to understand that together we can do anything that we want to do, provided that we stay together and stay convinced of our ultimate goal. So thank you very much and I look forward to this conference.

Albania resumed relations with the US after fifty-two years, in 1991. At the point, the first US diplomatic representative to Albania was Christopher Hill, in his first ever overseas posting, as acting ambassador, October 1–December 21, 1991. Hill also served as ambassador to Macedonia 1996–1999, which has a sizable Albanian ethnic minority, Poland 2000–2004, Korea 2004–2005 and Iraq 2009–2010. He led the US delegation to the Six Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons program 2003–2009. He also held other high posts within the US State Department.