**Ground Set for Vacuum Of Power in the Balkans**

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[UNITED NATIONS](http://www.nysun.com/related_results.php?term=United+Nations) — As Russian diplomats clashed with their American and European colleagues at the Security Council yesterday — leading to a standstill on the question of [Kosovo](http://www.nysun.com/related_results.php?term=Kosovo)'s sovereignty — the ground was set for a major power vacuum in the Balkans, a traditional flashpoint for major European wars.

Despite objections from [Russia](http://www.nysun.com/related_results.php?term=Russia), the U.N. Mission in Kosovo, which effectively rules the province's affairs, soon may begin to phase out its presence, yielding to a [European Union](http://www.nysun.com/related_results.php?term=European+Union) contingency, according to several Western diplomats.

Demonstrating the possible pitfalls of prolonging U.N. supervision, U.N. sources confirmed yesterday that the contract of UNMIK's deputy commander, Steven Schook, will not be renewed once it expires next week, as allegations of close ties and favoritism toward local businessmen surround him.

But U.N. diplomats yesterday said they feared that Kosovars might be too eager to declare independence, perhaps as soon as the Serbian national elections conclude in the spring. Such a move could lead to a Serbian blockade of the province, including a cutoff of electric and water supplies, and perhaps even to low-intensity armed skirmishes.

For Kosovars itching for independence from Serbia, yesterday marked a major step forward as the elected president, [Fatmir Sejdiu](http://www.nysun.com/related_results.php?term=Fatmir+Sejdiu), addressed the Security Council for the first time, facing off with the Serbian prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica.

Mr. Sejdiu's nameplate on the council's table, however, merely listed his name, without any mention of his presidential title, in a compromise emblematic of the sensitivities and contentious atmosphere at the council.

Europe and America are urging a transfer of security responsibilities to the European Union from the United Nations, with an eye toward "supervised independence," as proposed in a plan devised by a U.N. emissary, Martti Ahtisaari. But Belgrade opposes any move that would allow the majority ethnic Albanians to rule a region Serbs consider the cradle of their civilization. Serbia's ally Russia has blocked adoption of the Ahtisaari plan at the council, urging a negotiated solution instead. "Any move toward unilateral independence would clearly be outside the limits of international law," said Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, on a day that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also used the term "international law" to back his opposition to the deployment of European forces in Kosovo.

"Well, they are wrong," said the American U.N. ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, yesterday. "We have quite a number of legal experts – European, Americans – spending many months on this issue." Those legal eagles, he added, concluded that past Security Council resolutions do not exclude independence for Kosovo. A U.N. spokeswoman, Michele Montas, confirmed yesterday that the contract of Mr. Schook, an American, will expire by the year's end. Other officials said the peacekeeping department does not intend to renew the contract of the second-most important U.N. representative in Kosovo.

The Associated Press reported earlier this week that Mr. Schook was under investigation for his close ties with Kosovar leaders, including the energy minister, Et'hem Ceku, and an indicted Kosovar war criminal, Ramush Haradinaj. Along with recent reports of sexual advances toward local residents, Mr. Schook is reportedly tied to a coal power plant, a project promoted by the two Kosovar officials.