

12. And it is a point on which the EU and NATO are agreed. Commissioner Rehn said in a speech to the European Parliament on 27 March this year: 'There is no gain in delaying the decision. The UN has already been running Kosovo for 8 years. The status quo is not sustainable.' The NATO Secretary General said in June that 'the status quo is unacceptable. Kosovo is a very serious security problem in the heart of Europe.'

13. The decision to tackle status was taken on the back of a comprehensive UN review of the situation in Kosovo and with the full support of the UN, Contact Group and the EU.

We should also learn from recent experience over Kosovo.

14. In the 1990s the international community failed to focus on Kosovo, crossing its fingers and hoping that the Kosovo Albanians would reconcile themselves to remaining part of Serbia whilst the other component parts of Yugoslavia broke away from Belgrade. The resulting build-up of frustration led to a brutal spiral of insurgency and repression which ultimately required NATO intervention to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

15. It is also clear that instability in Kosovo, if allowed to take root, can easily infect neighbouring territories. Armed insurgencies in the Presevo Valley in Serbia between 1999-2000 and in Macedonia in 2001 were a direct consequence of the instability in Kosovo between 1998-99.

16. The civil disturbances in Kosovo in 2004 highlighted growing levels of frustration with the status quo and the need for Kosovo to have a clear political perspective.

17. To say this does not, as Belgrade alleges, amount to being blackmailed by the threat of violence. It is rather to recognise the reality that allowing an unresolved status issue to fester is likely to lead to a build-up of frustration which will sooner or later spill over into instability.

The passage of time will not make the problem any easier to resolve.

18. Hopes that the overthrow of Milosevic in 2000 would lead to a softening of Serb attitudes have not materialised. If anything, positions are continuing to harden on both sides. There will never be a good or easy moment to resolve Kosovo's status.

19. However, as the UN Comprehensive Review of the situation in Kosovo in 2005 concluded, "the risks of 'wait and see' are greater than the risks of addressing future status". The Review also judged that once the status issue has moved from a state of stagnation to expectation, it should not be allowed to slide backwards.