

---

---

## U.S., Serbian Leaders Discuss New Ways To Cooperate

By

**Jim Garamone**

**American Forces Press Service**

**Belgrade, Serbia, October 21, 2008**

The military-to-military relationship between the United States and Serbia is growing closer, the top military officers of both countries said here, Oct. 20, 2008.

Serbian Army Chief of Defense Gen. Zdravko Ponos and ADM Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke to reporters following their meeting on the relationship.

Mullen said the two men had a good, candid and productive meeting. "I always learn a great deal coming out and meeting someone face to face," he said.

The relationship between the United States and Serbia is difficult. The U.S. participated in Operation Allied Force — a 72-day NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 that forced the nation to withdraw military and paramilitary units out of Kosovo. Following U.S. recognition of Kosovo's independence earlier this year, a mob attacked the U.S. embassy here and burned part of it.

Still, the U.S. and Serbia must work together for peace in the region and beyond, Mullen said.

"This is a friendship that has weathered many trials and grown stronger and stronger with each additional contact," he said. "We are also partners, and partnerships are very important in the 21st century."

The Serb army is seeking to modernize, and the U.S. can help, the chairman said. Serbian officers are attending U.S. staff and war colleges, and Serbian cadets attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

Serb military leaders also are working to establish a modern noncommissioned officer corps, modeled after the U.S. example. But cooperation in the region is most important, Mullen said.



*BELGRADE, Serbia — U.S. Navy ADM Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. Zdravko Ponos, Serbian chief of defense, answer questions during a press conference here, Oct. 20, 2008. Mullen was on a three-day trip to the region to visit defense counterparts. (DoD photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley)*

---

---

“Serbia’s cooperation with [NATO’s Kosovo Force] in the Joint Implementation Council has been greatly appreciated, and your interest in modernizing your military through the Partnership for Peace program is commendable,” he said.

The chairman called Ponos “a strong partner in a vital region where “security and stability continue to be incredibly important to achieve and sustain.””

Both men agreed that their two countries have totally different opinions of Kosovo and that this complicates the relationship. Serbs regard Kosovo as an integral part of their nation, even though only a small number of ethnic Serbs live there.

“These are very complicated political relations in which the military has to cooperate,” Ponos said through an interpreter.

The relations between the two countries have come a long way since the low point of the late 1990s. After the democratically elected government came into power following the fall of Serb strongman Slobodon Milosevic, the United States and Serbia began rebuilding the military-to-military relationship. Now, “there is too big an investment to be pulled down,” Ponos said.

“Under such difficult political relations, economic relations between the two nations continue to grow,” he said. “Cultural relations continue to grow, too. Why shouldn’t military relations continue to grow, even though those are the most difficult aspect of it all?”

The Serb military chief said that every generation of leaders must continue to build relations. “Everything they are doing should be putting one more brick into the relationship for the generation to come,” he said.

Mullen said that although the nations are separated on Kosovo, they share much common ground.

“We are in complete agreement on the success of the military-to-military engagements,” the chairman said, “not just on paper, [but also] on the ground, where we are able to exchange and assist and make a difference for the future.

“Most importantly,” he said, “what we continue to agree on is that these developments occur in an environment that does not have violence in it, and we continue to move ahead peacefully with respect to Kosovo and, indeed, in the region.”

Mullen said he is not in Serbia to dictate to the Serb military leaders what they should do. Rather, he said, he is here to listen to the leaders, address their concerns, and find new ways to work together.