



Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 30: U.S. Troops In Macedonia: Back Door To War?

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Executive Summary

The continued presence of U.S. troops as a tripwire force in Macedonia is an increasingly risky venture. President Clinton's apparent rationale for the deployment was to deter further Serb expansionism, thereby preventing the conflict in Bosnia from becoming a wider Balkan war. But the Macedonia mission places U.S. troops adjacent to Serbia's restive, predominantly Albanian province of Kosovo. The outbreak of fighting in Kosovo, which could erupt at any time, would likely spill over the border into Macedonia, involving the American forces stationed there.

Moreover, Macedonia itself may be the target of expansionist ambitions of Albania, Bulgaria, and Greece as well as Serbia. The recent decision by Athens to impose an economic embargo against its northern neighbor is the latest manifestation of tension. Although Bosnia remains the most likely arena in which the United States could become entangled in a Balkan war, Clinton's regional containment strategy--symbolized by the Macedonia deployment--also entails serious risks.

Introduction

Concerns that the United States might intervene in the fighting convulsing the former Yugoslavia have thus far centered on the conflict in Bosnia. The Clinton administration's episodic threats to launch air strikes against Serb forces if they continue to besiege Sarajevo represent one possible scenario for U.S. involvement. Indeed, the likelihood of that scenario has increased significantly in the aftermath of NATO's February 1994 "ultimatum" to Serb forces. Another possibility would be the introduction of U.S. forces as part of a United Nations/NATO mission to enforce a peace settlement reached by Bosnia's contending Croat, Serb, and Muslim factions. The hostile public reaction to U.S. casualties in the Somalia "peacekeeping" operation underscored the political risks inherent in a similar Bosnia enterprise, but the administration nevertheless continues to insist that it would contribute troops to such a force.

Although Bosnia continues to be the most likely arena for U.S. intervention in the Balkans, President Clinton's decision last summer to send 330 U.S. soldiers to the former Yugoslavian republic of Macedonia as part of a UN peacekeeping operation also has lethal potential. Clinton's rationale for deploying those troops was to prevent the fighting in Bosnia from spreading southward, thereby possibly igniting a wider Balkan war. What the administration's regional containment strategy may ultimately do, however, is entangle the United States in the tragic Yugoslavian conflict that American policymakers have thus far been wise enough to avoid--despite periodic bouts of saber rattling.

A Risky Tripwire Strategy

Washington's policy on Macedonia is so flawed and internally contradictory that it verges on incoherence. The United States sent troops months before it even extended diplomatic recognition to an independent Macedonia. Sensitivity to objections by Greece (and Greek-American voters) to the use of the name "Macedonia" by the new republic caused the

Clinton administration to delay establishing diplomatic relations.[1] The United States found itself, therefore, in the novel position of deploying military forces to protect a country that it did not officially acknowledge--an anomaly that was not corrected until February 1994.

That is only one of the many bizarre aspects of American policy. The U.S. military contingent is under orders to merely "observe and report" on developments along the Serbian-Macedonian border. As Air Force Times columnist Fred Reed notes, if Serbian forces did invade Macedonia, one would normally expect the Western news media to report the event. American soldiers are clearly not needed as cub reporters to cover a Balkan war. Despite the official mandate to observe and report, it is apparent that the U.S. troops are there to deter Serbia from making aggressive moves against its southern neighbor. What is less clear is whether the Clinton administration fully comprehends the implications of that mission. Reed points out, correctly, that the tiny American force could accomplish little of military value in the event of a conflict: "The intimidating effect of 300 troops relies on the belief that, if the 300 are messed with, several armored divisions will come to see why." [2]

Therein lies the potential danger of the administration's initiative. If fighting erupts in Macedonia, the U.S. force can easily become a tripwire for full-scale military engagement. A senior Pentagon official acknowledged that if American troops found themselves in danger, they would have to be either reinforced or withdrawn.[3] Escalation would be the more likely scenario, since hawks in the United States would insist that America's "credibility" was at stake. Indeed, Secretary of State Warren Christopher stressed that "the U.S. is not likely to leave its troops in Macedonia undefended. You can be sure of that." [4] Macedonian deputy foreign minister Risto Nikoyas is quite candid about the situation into which the United States has gotten itself. While conceding that the small troop presence has more of a symbolic than a military effect, Nikoyas added, "Having 300 Americans here is also an obligation for the United States; in case of difficulty, they cannot just flee from Macedonia." [5]

Is Macedonia a Likely Battleground?

Although at the moment the Serbs are busy attempting to consolidate territorial gains in Croatia and Bosnia, Serbian expansionists may ultimately have designs on Macedonia, which nationalist elements typically call "southern Serbia." (The region was part of Serbia until it was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1371.) Although there is not a large Serb minority in Macedonia (Serbs make up barely 2 percent of the population), historical factors could be sufficient to interest Belgrade.

Macedonia is also a potential arena for conflict arising from competing territorial claims of several other regional powers. Bulgaria qualified its recognition of Macedonia by reiterating its long-standing claim that Macedonians are merely "western Bulgarians." [6] Sali Berisha, president of Albania, has demanded that Macedonia's Albanian population (some 21 percent of the total) be given cultural and political autonomy. (Albania, in fact, sought to block Macedonia's entrance into the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe until the government in Skopje accorded Albanians the status of "constituent nation," with the right to veto any proposed changes to the Macedonian constitution.) [7] And Greece, of course, displays open hostility to the new republic; most recently, Athens imposed an economic embargo and virtually closed the border with its northern neighbor. [8]

There is a significant possibility that the fate of Macedonia will be similar to Bosnia's--and for similar reasons. Bosnia has never been a viable political entity; it is a location rather than a nation, a piece of land where ethnoreligious factions collided several centuries ago and have continued to battle intermittently ever since. Macedonia exhibits many of the same characteristics. Journalist Robert D. Kaplan notes that Macedonia was the inspiration for the French word for "mixed salad" (macedoine), which accurately connotes the country's demographic diversity. [9] An artificial multiethnic state does not have good prospects for survival in a region that is witnessing a rising tide of ethnic and religious chauvinism.

History offers little reason for optimism, either. Author Misha Glenny notes that "whenever war has broken out in this century, either Bosnia or Macedonia has been its main theater." [10] Indeed, Macedonia was both the principal arena of and the principal prize in two brief but bloody struggles, the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913. The first conflict pitted Turkey, which then controlled Macedonia, against a loose alliance of Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro. The second found Bulgaria waging war against Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, and Romania over the territorial spoils of the

first. Bulgaria, thwarted in its goal of acquiring Macedonia during the First Balkan War, and completely excluded from the territory after being defeated in the second, subsequently made an alliance with Germany and the other Central Powers in World War I, hoping to reverse that outcome. It tried again in World War II, allying itself with Nazi Germany for the explicit purpose of "recovering" Macedonia.[11] That tenacity is testimony to the long-standing nature of Bulgaria's ambitions regarding Macedonia. Despite Sofia's reluctant (and heavily qualified) recognition of Macedonia's independence, those ambitions have not disappeared.

There is little indication that the situation in Macedonia is significantly more stable today than it was at the time of the Balkan Wars, given the smoldering ethnic and territorial disputes. The attitudes of Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece also demonstrate that Serb expansionism is not the only source of potential danger to the tiny U.S. peacekeeping force. An extremely worrisome omen occurred in November when the Macedonian government claimed to have foiled a secessionist plot directed by Albania.[12] A tripwire strategy is inherently risky, but it is especially so in a case involving multiple, competing expansionist powers.

The Linkage to Kosovo

The deployment of a tripwire force in Macedonia is imprudent, but even more alarming is the tendency of "containment" enthusiasts to link that presence with suggestions for similar action in the adjacent territory of Kosovo to protect the Albanian majority there from Serb oppression. That various pundits have advocated such a measure is bad enough, but more disturbing is a senior administration official's admission that the dispatch of U.S. troops to Kosovo was seriously considered in May 1993.[13]

Proponents of intervention seem to forget that Kosovo is a province of Serbia, and an attempt to deploy American soldiers there would constitute an act of war. They apparently indulge in the same fantasy as Albanian president Berisha, who in response to a journalist's query about whether Serbia would ever allow NATO forces in Kosovo, stated: "NATO doesn't need Serb acceptance. It can be done as in Korea or Somalia. They will not be there to kill Serbs; they will be there to protect the area [against more ethnic cleansing]."[14]

It is far more likely that Serbia (or any other state with a modicum of military capability) would forcibly resist the occupation of one of its provinces by a foreign army. Moreover, that probability is especially high in this case, given the intense emotional and historical significance of Kosovo to Serbia. As historian Thomas Emmert observes, Kosovo is considered holy land by Serbs--the core of the medieval Serbian kingdom and the scene of their devastating defeat at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1389, which ushered in nearly five centuries of Turkish domination. (Serbia did not regain its independence until the Congress of Berlin in 1878, and Kosovo itself was not retaken until 1912, during the First Balkan War.) Emmert and other experts on the Balkans warn that Serbs throughout the region would passionately support Serbia's right to protect its "Jerusalem." [15]

Nevertheless, interventionists invariably contend that the United States and its European allies ought to protect Kosovo's Albanian majority. One reason they cite is to prevent a larger Balkan war. A Serbian crackdown on Kosovo, they warn, would at the very least produce a flood of refugees into Albania and Macedonia. Such destabilization would provoke intervention by Albania, as well as unsettle the delicate ethnic balance in Macedonia, thereby putting great pressure on Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey to cross the Macedonian border to protect their minorities. Glenny, for example, asserts that if "Macedonia becomes the southern Balkan battlefield, the opening gun will be fired in Kosovo." [16]

Proponents of intervention contend that it is also imperative for moral reasons. According to their thesis, the brutal regime of Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade has not only abolished Kosovo's status as an autonomous province--guaranteed in the old Yugoslavian constitution--but is depriving Albanian Kosovars of virtually all political rights and civil liberties. Even worse, Belgrade now seems poised to launch a full-scale campaign of genocide under the banner of ethnic cleansing. The United States was culpable for not taking action in Bosnia, they insist, and it must not stand by while the same thing happens in Kosovo.

As is the case for most things in the Balkans, the reality is considerably more complicated. There is little doubt that Belgrade's policies toward Kosovo in recent years have been repressive. From the Serb perspective, however, not only does Serbia have a compelling historical claim to Kosovo, but Serbs, not Albanians, have been the victims of

persecution--if one adopts a longer term view. They contend that as late as the 1930s, Kosovo had a Serb majority. Only after Benito Mussolini conquered Albania in 1939 and the Nazi army defeated Yugoslavia in 1941 did the population mix began to shift, as Italy authorized its Albanian protectorate to annex Kosovo. Although Yugoslavia reacquired the province in 1945, the communist government of Marshal Josip Broz Tito continued a pro-Albanian policy as part of a larger strategy to constrain Serb influence in the Yugoslavian federation. Discriminatory measures adopted by a succession of Albanian-dominated Kosovo governments (with Tito's blessing) caused hundreds of thousands of Serbs to leave the province, including some 320,000 between 1966 and 1981 alone.[17] According to Serb nationalists, that forcible out-migration is why Kosovo is now 85 percent Albanian.

The Serb case has serious deficiencies. For example, the higher birthrate of the Albanians--among the highest in Europe--was at least as responsible for the changing demographics as were the anti-Serb policies adopted by the Kosovo government. Nevertheless, Serb residents of Kosovo were targets of discrimination--and sometimes acts of persecution--for more than four decades. Although that fact does not justify the perpetration of injustices against Albanian Kosovars in the 1990s, it does help explain the intensity of the Serb sense of victimization as well as the Milosevic regime's determination to keep Kosovo Serbian.[18]

American politicians and pundits who contend that the situation in Kosovo is one of bigoted Serb oppressors versus innocent Albanian victims gloss over an extremely complicated historical record. They are guilty of portraying the moral muddle of Balkan politics as a pristine melodrama and, even worse, of wanting to base Washington's policy on that misconception. Not only do they dismiss legitimate Serb grievances in connection with Kosovo, but they ignore the issue of Albania's territorial ambitions, which apparently include restoring the boundaries the country had as Italy's protectorate in the early 1940s. The Berisha regime appears intent on incorporating Kosovo--and possibly portions of Macedonia with sizable Albanian populations as well.

U.S. officials seem dangerously casual about the risks of meddling in Kosovo. In December 1992 President George Bush warned Belgrade not to entertain notions of "ethnically cleansing" the province of its Albanian population. Bush's letter to Serbian president Milosevic stated bluntly, "In the event of conflict in Kosovo caused by Serbian action, the United States will be prepared to employ military force against the Serbians in Kosovo and in Serbia proper." [19] President Clinton expressed a similar warning in March 1993.[20] Sen. William Cohen (R-Maine) advocates a congressional resolution endorsing the Bush-Clinton declarations, thus making it clear to Milosevic: "Cross that line, and Belgrade is in the cross hairs." [21]

U.S. policy appears to be moving toward making the Albanian Kosovars de facto clients of the United States. That step is fraught with danger. Even former State Department official George Kenney, an outspoken advocate of a hard-line policy in the Balkans, concedes, "It is not a question of whether Kosovo will explode, but when." [22]

Kenney is not engaging in hyperbole. The province's Albanian population is increasingly restless under Belgrade's repressive policies, and an armed revolt appears imminent. Given the mythic significance of Kosovo in Serb history, it is highly improbable that any Serbian government would (or could) voluntarily relinquish control of the province. Since the United States has put itself on record as being prepared to use force to prevent more drastic forms of repression, the ingredients are all in place for a military conflagration. Indeed, the Bush and Clinton statements may encourage the Kosovars to make a bid for independence, in the belief that they can rely on U.S. assistance. The Albanian government also has every incentive to foment trouble in Kosovo as part of a strategy to realize the goal of a greater Albania--an entity that some Albanian officials believe would emerge from the ashes of a successful war by the West against Serbia.

Risking a Needless Conflict

Public opinion surveys consistently show considerable public resistance to U.S. military involvement in the former Yugoslavia.[23] The extent and tenacity of such opposition were apparently one factor that caused President Clinton to reconsider his inclination to intervene in the Bosnian conflict in May 1993, and they have continued to constrain administration actions.

In this case, the public's wariness is justified. There is no doubt that the violent breakup of Yugoslavia has been a

tragedy for the parties involved, and Kosovo or Macedonia may become the arena for the next round of fighting. Nevertheless, there is nothing at stake that even remotely approaches a vital American security interest. It has become a cliché among interventionists to compare Serbia to Nazi Germany, with Milosevic playing the role of the "new Hitler." According to proponents of U.S. military action in the Balkans, the United States risks a rerun of the tragic events of the late 1930s if it fails to stifle aggression in its early stages. Those who embrace that view adopt a simplistic, rote interpretation of history that ignores fundamental differences between the two situations.

The crisis in the 1930s involved one of the world's great powers--one with the second largest economy and a large, well-trained military force--embarking on a frightening expansionist binge. Serbia, on the other hand, has a population of 9.8 million (about the same as Belgium's) and a gross domestic product less than one-fifth of Denmark's. Indeed, even before the UN economic sanctions began to bite, Serbia's 1991 GDP of \$18.75 billion was only modestly greater than Luxembourg's.[24] Belgrade's military forces, while not insignificant, largely consist of remnants of the old Yugoslavian federal army (augmented by the Serb militias in Bosnia and Croatia). The effects of the Yugoslavian civil war and the UN arms embargo--despite some leakage-- have combined to degrade the readiness of those forces. Although Serb military units might well be capable of mounting a ferocious resistance to an intervening army in Serbia itself, or in Serb-controlled portions of Bosnia and Croatia, it is highly unlikely that they could mount credible offensive operations against neighboring states, much less against the major industrial powers of Western Europe.

In the late 1930s Germany was capable of creating a massive disruption of the international system; in the 1990s Serbia is capable only of modestly strengthening its position at the expense of its ethnic rivals within the boundaries of the former Yugoslavia. Not only does Belgrade not have territorial ambitions outside those borders, it would lack the economic and military power to pursue broader ambitions even if it did have them.

Consequently, the fighting in the former Yugoslavia is a parochial struggle with little importance outside the immediate region. Even the worst-case scenario--the spread of the conflict to Kosovo and Macedonia, with subsequent intervention by such outside powers as Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey--would not fundamentally alter that reality. Unless the United States foolishly puts its prestige on the line, and its military forces in harm's way, there is little intrinsic reason why a third Balkan war would threaten vital American interests any more than did the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 (which involved many of the same parties).

Indeed, there is even less reason today than during those earlier struggles. In the years immediately preceding World War I, two increasingly antagonistic alliances confronted each other across the heart of Europe. Those rival alliances included all of Europe's great powers, and key members of both alliances were closely identified with Balkan clients. Thus, there was always the potential that a Balkan conflict would escalate to a continent-wide war (as ultimately happened in 1914) that could threaten important U.S. security interests. The situation today is considerably different. Europe is not cleaved by rival alliances, nor is there eagerness on the part of major European powers to push the expansionist agendas of Balkan client states. In fact, both Russia and the principal members of the European Union have repeatedly resisted calls to become involved militarily (beyond deploying small contingents as part of the UN peacekeeping forces in Croatia and Bosnia) in the Yugoslavian morass.

The conflict in the former Yugoslavia should cause American policymakers to reflect on the nature of legitimate U.S. interests in Europe. America does have security concerns on the Continent, but they are--or at least should be--relatively narrow. The core interest is to prevent any power (or an alliance of hostile powers) from achieving a dominant position and thereby controlling the major industrial states of Western Europe. Containing a would-be hegemonic state is a more realistic objective than adopting a smothering strategy--seeking to pacify every portion of the Continent, however remote and obscure, and to resolve every ethnic feud or territorial dispute that might lead to armed conflict. Such a goal would be unnecessary as well as unattainable.

In the absence of a great-power challenger, such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, that could dominate Europe and pose a serious threat to America's well-being, the United States can afford to view lesser regional conflicts with considerable detachment. There is no justification for Washington's seeking to micromanage the Continent's security. That is especially true of intervening in the perennially unstable Balkans.

It would be tragic if having thus far avoided entering the Balkan imbroglio through the front door in Croatia or Bosnia,

the United States found itself entering through the back door in Macedonia or Kosovo. President Clinton may have opted to send U.S. troops to Macedonia as an apparently low-risk way of appearing to "do something" about the Yugoslavian war, thereby appeasing hawkish elements in the United States who were angered by his failure to intervene in Bosnia. Even if that was his rationale, deploying American forces as a tripwire on the perimeter of a dangerous and unpredictable conflict is imprudent. The debacle in Somalia should have taught U.S. policymakers the folly of even well-intentioned interventions in complex, multifactional disputes that the United States comprehends dimly, if at all. President Clinton should extricate the American "peacekeeping" force from Macedonia immediately.

Notes

[1] Athens vehemently objects to the use of the name "Macedonia" by the new republic, insisting that it implies territorial claims on the Greek province of Macedonia. Greece's complaints led to a compromise that resulted in the country's being admitted to the United Nations under the cumbersome name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Greek-American groups, however, opposed U.S. diplomatic recognition even under that condition.

[2] Fred Reed, "Our Troops in Macedonia Are at Great Risk," *Air Force Times*, August 23, 1993, p. 62.

[3] Elaine Sciolino, "U.S. Says It Will Send 300 Troops to Balkan Republic to Limit Strife," *New York Times*, June 11, 1993, p. A1.

[4] Quoted in *ibid.*

[5] Quoted in John Pomfret, "First U.S. Troops Arrive in Balkans," *Washington Post*, July 6, 1993, p. A1.

[6] Sabrina Petra Ramet, "War in the Balkans," *Foreign Affairs* 71 (Fall 1992): 87.

[7] Misha Glenny, "Is Macedonia Next?" *New York Times*, July 30, 1993, p. A27.

[8] James Rupert, "Athens Adds to Embargo of Macedonia," *Washington Post*, February 19, 1994, p. A22.

[9] Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), p. 57.

[10] Glenny.

[11] Kaplan, pp. 63-66.

[12] Andrew Borowiec, "Macedonia Says It Has Thwarted a Military Plot from Albania," *Washington Times*, November 11, 1993, p. A15.

[13] Barton Gellman and Ann Devroy, "U.S. Weighs Troops for Macedonia," *Washington Post*, May 12, 1993, p. A1.

[14] "A Call for NATO's Intervention," interview, *Christian Science Monitor*, July 16, 1993, p. 8.

[15] Thomas Emmert, "Why Serbia Will Fight for 'Holy' Kosovo," *Washington Post*, June 13, 1993, p. C1.

[16] Glenny.

[17] Alex N. Dragnich, *Serbs and Croats: The Struggle in Yugoslavia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 162-65; and Andrew Borowiec, "Diplomats Fear Kosovo on Brink of Ethnic Fighting," *Washington Times*, August 25, 1993, p. A9.

[18] For a concise discussion of the Serb preoccupation with victimization and heroic resistance during the centuries since the Battle of Kosovo, and the exploitation of that attitude by the Milosevic regime, see Christopher Cviic, "A Culture of Humiliation," *National Interest* 32 (Summer 1993): 79-82.

[19] Quoted in John M. Goshko, "Bush Threatens 'Military Force' if Serbs Attack Ethnic Albanians," *Washington Post*,

December 29, 1992, p. A10.

[20] "Clinton Warns Serbian Leaders on Military Action in Kosovo," Washington Post, March 2, 1993, p. A14. The U.S. State Department issued a new round of warnings in October that the United States would regard any Serbian use of military force in Kosovo as "a very serious matter" and would respond. Colum Lynch, "In a Balkan Corner, Concern on U.S. Troops," Boston Globe, October 30, 1993, p. A4.

[21] William S. Cohen, "In the Balkans: Get Real," Washington Post, July 14, 1993, p. A21. For a similar view, see the article by Joseph DioGuardi, a former congressman from New York. Joseph J. DioGuardi, "The Line on Serbian Aggression Should Be Drawn at Kosovo," Washington Times, November 18, 1993, p. A19.

[22] George Kenney, "From Bosnian Crisis to All-Out War," New York Times, June 20, 1993, p. E17.

[23] For examples, see the results of an NBC/Wall Street Journal poll and a Louis Harris poll in "Opinion Outlook," National Journal, January 16, 1993, p. 157; another NBC/Wall Street Journal survey, Wall Street Journal, March 19, 1993, p. A12; a USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll, "Most Think U.S. Should Stay Out," USA Today, May 7, 1993, p. 7; a CBS News poll in "Opinion Outlook," National Journal, June 5, 1993, p. 1375; and two NBC/Wall Street Journal surveys in "Opinion Outlook," National Journal, October 2, 1993, p. 2396, and November 27, 1993, p. 2855. Despite the massive propaganda barrage for U.S. action following the mortar attack that killed 68 civilians in a Sarajevo marketplace, the American public still remained wary. A subsequent USA Today/CNN/ Gallup Poll indicated no more than a narrow plurality (48 percent to 43 percent) supported air strikes and 59 percent opposed sending ground troops. Gary Fields, "No Consensus on U.S. Role," USA Today, February 8, 1994, p. A4.

[24] International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 1992-1993 (London: Brassey's, 1992), pp. 51, 87.