49. The Balkan Thicket

Congress should

- withdraw all U.S. troops from Bosnia,
- urge the Western European Union to expand its military responsibility for Bosnia,
- discontinue subsidizing the West's nation-building experiment in Bosnia,
- oppose U.S. military intervention in the embattled Serbian province of Kosovo,
- resist imposing new economic sanctions on Serbia, and
- pressure the Clinton administration to stop increasing military and intelligence ties with Albania.

Since 1992 Bosnia has had a top spot on the U.S. foreign policy agenda, but it is becoming increasingly apparent that the Clinton administration is inching its way toward another military intervention in the Balkans—this time in the embattled Serbian province of Kosovo. The president, however, has yet to explain to the American public how U.S. national security is threatened in Kosovo, what the potential costs of intervention are in American lives and defense spending, and how a new military commitment in the Balkans will affect the nation's readiness to respond to crises elsewhere in the world. Washington's Balkans policy is ill conceived and threatens to mire the United States in another internecine conflict. Congress should therefore reverse the U.S. course in the Balkans.

Bosnia

NATO Peacekeeping

Because Europe is the area most directly affected by events in the Balkans, the three-year-old peacekeeping mission in Bosnia should be

redefined as a European operation that does not require a U.S. troop presence. In carrying out the rest of the Bosnia mission themselves, Europeans would take a long-overdue step in building their own security and defense identity that does not depend psychologically and militarily on the participation of the United States. That would not only make the countries closest to Bosnia responsible for maintaining regional stability; it would also contribute to the strengthening of the credibility of European security institutions and improve the quality, consistency, impact, and visibility of their operations. To a great extent, it was precisely the lack of a robust, European security architecture in 1992–95 that inhibited the Continent's ability to handle the crisis in Bosnia. It is time to replace the NATO-led Bosnian peacekeeping operation—which currently includes 6,900 American soldiers—with a European operation. Only then can Europe begin to seriously construct its own security identity and institutions.

Over the past few years, NATO has taken steps to enable Europe to undertake just such a project. Indeed, by beginning to work out procedures for releasing certain NATO assets to the Western European Union, designating NATO's deputy supreme allied commander as Europe's prospective strategic commander, and identifying NATO officers who could be loaned to European operations, the alliance has recognized that there are circumstances in which Europe should act militarily without bringing into play the full apparatus of the transatlantic alliance (i.e., the United States). Bosnia presents Europe with a unique opportunity to commence building that security architecture. As former U.S. ambassador to NATO Robert E. Hunter explains, ''The Balkans is the place to test the possibilities that now exist for a true European security and defense identity.''

Rebuilding Socialism

Shortly after the Dayton Peace Accords halted the fighting in Bosnia in late 1995, the World Bank announced it would raise $5 billion in reconstruction aid. Concerned with securing large pledges from the U.S. and other Western governments, bank officials claimed that the breakaway Yugoslav republic was intent on privatizing its economy as soon as possible. Bosnia would respond quickly to privatization, explained the bank's director for Central Europe, Kemal Dervis. ''This is not an economy like the former Soviet republics,'' he assured skeptics. ''Yugoslavia was halfway to the market when the war started.''

Three years and more than $3 billion in aid later, Bosnia has yet to implement a comprehensive privatization plan to desocialize its economy.

The primary obstacle to privatization in Bosnia has been political foot-dragging. Many Bosnian officials are resisting privatization in order to protect a highly bureaucratic system of jobs and privileges left over from communist days. In many cases the heads of Bosnia's major state-owned enterprises—such as the main utility, Elektroprivreda—are also members of the local ruling party. Party officials use state-owned enterprises to further their own financial and political interests. Officials close to Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic, for example, run the state-owned television station. So far, they have resisted privatization and blocked the start-up of an independent, Western-financed competitor.

Bosnia's ongoing failure to implement a viable privatization plan has had a disastrous economic impact. Although Bosnia's economy is estimated to have grown 25 percent in 1998, most of that ''growth'' reflects an influx of billions of dollars in international aid, not an expanding national economy. Bosnians may be building bridges and airports with aid money, but that activity only masks the underlying sickness of their economy. ''There's really no economic growth,'' admits Peter Hanney, head of private business development for the UN's Office of the High Representative; ''there's no job creation.''

The reality is that Bosnia is in an economic coma. Most state-owned enterprises are struggling to stay open. Many are completely dormant. Unemployment, which fell after the war, did not improve at all in 1997, and 60 percent of workers remain idle today. Moreover, the Bosnian government's unwillingness to privatize state-owned banks has held back the formation of financial institutions capable of offering reasonable commercial loans to start new businesses. Other remnants of the communist era—onerous taxes and regulations—also continue to thwart business start-ups. ''Things are still so rigidly controlled here that many businessmen can't get off the ground even if they have money and ideas,'' explains one Bosnian reconstruction specialist.

The Bosnian government's resistance to privatization, of course, was known last year when President Clinton informed American taxpayers that they would have to pay for additional reconstruction aid for Bosnia. Given that there is little prospect for real economic growth and foreign investment in Bosnia without privatization, the question now is, What impact will the foreign aid actually have? As one U.S. official recently noted, ''The goal is not to rebuild a socialist economy'' in Bosnia. Unfortunately, that may be the result. Ironically, after financing the Cold War for 40 years, American taxpayers now find themselves in the curious position

of rebuilding the institutional remnants of a defunct communist state. Congress should end that contradiction.

High Hypocrisy

High Representative Carlos Westendorp, the UN official in charge of implementing the Dayton Peace Accords in Bosnia, is increasingly assuming autocratic powers. So far, he has dictated Bosnia's citizenship and passport laws, decided what the country's first national currency will look like, and imposed a national flag. Westendorp's authority to take such high-handed actions had its origin in a December 1997 meeting in Bonn of the nations implementing the peace plan. That group granted him a broad mandate to settle political disputes if Bosnian officials missed a series of deadlines. It also gave him the power to dismiss elected officials who resisted his efforts to build a common government.

But to hear Westendorp's account, he didn't need the Bonn committee's approval to take action. In November 1997, a month before the Bonn meeting, he explained, ''You see, if you read Dayton carefully . . . Annex 10 gives me the possibility to interpret my own authorities and powers. Therefore I do not need anything new, in the legal sense. . . . If they want to give this to me in writing at the Bonn conference it would be the best, and if not, I am going to do it anyway.'' And in describing his authority, Westendorp asserts that if Bosnia's elected officials can't ''agree about some decision, for example the passports, the license plates, the flag . . . I will stop this process of infinite discussions. In the future, it will look like this: I will give them . . . a term to bring a certain decision, that is to agree about some decision. If they do not, I will tell them not to worry, that I will decide for them.''

Westendorp's comments should come as no surprise; they are consistent with his patronizing treatment of the Bosnian people. As he explained to them in his New Year's Eve speech of December 31, 1997, ''We are here to help you overcome that very human instinct of exaggerating the differences that separate us from our neighbors.'' Thus, he informed them, ''I have to take decisions now and in the future with your best interests in mind, should your leaders fail to take them.''

Westendorp's imperious attitude exposes the fundamental hypocrisy of the U.S.-led Dayton Peace Accords. That is, in attempting to impose democracy and Western-style liberalism on Bosnia, the United States has allowed an unelected foreign official to behave like an autocrat. Westendorp says he needs U.S. troops to stay in Bosnia so he can carry out his

work. But since hostilities ended in 1995, only 500,000 refugees, of 2.8 million total, have returned to their prewar homes, and fewer than 55,000 have returned to areas where they would be in the minority. Over the same three-year period, the United States has spent more than $10 billion on peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts in Bosnia (not to mention that corruption and fraud have led to the disappearance of $600 million in Western aid). At that rate, Westendorp's goal of recomposing a multiethnic Bosnia would take at least another 11 years and cost American taxpayers an additional $35 billion. Congress should stop subsidizing Westendorp's hypocritical and onerous experiment in nation building.

Kosovo

Military Intervention

The United States currently has 6,900 combat troops in Bosnia and 350 in Macedonia. As if that weren't enough involvement in the volatile Balkans to tempt fate, recent violence in the Serbian province of Kosovo has prompted calls for still more American military intervention in the region, including air strikes, the imposition of a no-fly zone, and the deployment of peacekeeping troops along the Albania-Kosovo border and in the province itself. The idea of sending more American service people to the Balkans, however, should be resisted by Congress.

First, American troops would encounter conflicts of fervent and incompatible ethnic interests. On one side of the dispute are ethnic Albanians who make up 85–90 percent of the Kosovo population. Most are Muslims who boycott Serbian state institutions, resist speaking the Serbian language, and view the Serbian special police as an occupation army. On the other side of the dispute are Serbs who consider Kosovo the cradle of their culture and religion; Kosovo is where Serbia's medieval Nemanjic Dynasty fell to Ottoman forces in 1389 and home of the Pec Patriarchete, one of Serbia's oldest and most cherished religious sites. Many Serbs are about as willing to give up Kosovo to Albanians as Israelis are to give up Jerusalem to Palestinians. Putting American troops in the middle of that kind of conflict is bound to produce casualties.

Second, military intervention in Kosovo could unfold as it has in Bosnia; that is, become a nation-building experiment with no end in sight. It should be recalled that in his November 1995 address making the case for sending U.S. troops to Bosnia, President Clinton assured the American public that the operation he was proposing had a ''clear, limited and achievable''

mission and that the total deployment ''should and will take about one year.'' Since then, the president has changed his mind three times about U.S. troop withdrawal, and Washington now has an open-ended troop commitment to Bosnia. It should also be recalled that the Clinton administration claimed that the Bosnian intervention would be a strictly military operation. As Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott explained in a November 1995 speech, ''There will be no 'mission creep'—from purely military tasks into 'nation-building.' '' But we now know that that's exactly what has happened in Bosnia.

Spreading the Conflict

The Clinton administration worries that the conflict in Kosovo could grow and spread. As Secretary of Defense William Cohen notes, ''There is a genuine concern throughout the region that if this goes unchecked, it could have much wider implications than just Kosovo.'' Indeed, the Kosovo conflict is likely to grow and spread, but not in the way Secretary Cohen imagines.

- If intervention takes the form of air strikes and the imposition of a no-fly zone, the guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army will benefit, because only one side of the conflict—the Serbian government—will actually feel the pressure of those measures. There are no guerrilla jets to shoot down, no guerrilla installations to threaten with NATO air strikes. As a result, bombing Serbia or imposing a no-fly zone over Kosovo will not deter the KLA from waging war for an independent Kosovo. In fact, the opposite will happen. The rebels will have everything to gain by exploiting the strategic opportunity U.S. intervention creates for them. A similar scenario unfolded in Bosnia in 1995 when U.S. warplanes dropped more than 1,000 bombs on Serb targets and thereby gave Muslim and Croat forces an opportunity to launch an advance that triggered a wave of 200,000 refugees.
- If military intervention takes the form of sending peacekeeping troops directly into Kosovo, that action could harden the province's demand to break away from Serbia. Although U.S. policy is officially opposed to independence for Kosovo, peacekeepers will convey a competing message: that Washington will not allow Belgrade to forcibly resist secession. Many Kosovar Albanians already believe that Washington is on their side, and sending peacekeepers will only reinforce their belief that the United States implicitly backs their demand. ''One of our main struggles is to convince them that we really don't support

independence,'' explains Richard Huckaby, director of an office of the U.S. Information Agency in Kosovo. ''They just don't get it. . . . I have tried really hard to lower their expectations.''

- If military intervention takes the form of deploying NATO troops along the Kosovo-Albanian border, that will not stop the bloodshed in Kosovo. It will simply prevent Kosovar Albanians from acquiring weapons from Albania to defend themselves. The resulting slaughter could create greater nationalist political pressure in neighboring Albania, not less, and increase the likelihood that Albania will become directly involved in Kosovo.
- If military intervention, in whatever form, appears to be facilitating Kosovo's secession, it could cause a backlash in Bosnia if the Bosnian Serbs interpret it as a sign of a broader anti-Serb Western agenda. That would not only expose U.S. troops stationed in Bosnia to possible acts of retribution like those that occurred against American Marines in Beirut in the 1980s or more recently in Somalia; it would also threaten to undermine the fragile U.S.-brokered peace in Bosnia as well.

Congress should resist the administration's inclination to intervene in Kosovo. The events there pose no threat to U.S. national security—the territorial integrity, national sovereignty, or general welfare of the United States is not in jeopardy. Moreover, the assertion that the conflict will grow and spread without American intervention is only half the story. Intervention itself could exacerbate the situation and spread the conflict to Albania and Bosnia.

Enlarging NATO's Purview—Again

On February 28, 1994, NATO forces conducted the first combat operations in the alliance's 45-year history when two U.S. F-16s shot down four Bosnian Serb warplanes that were violating a UN no-fly zone. But NATO wasn't created to sort out the Balkans' internecine conflicts. It was created to defend the geographic territory of member nations against external threats. If Washington approves NATO intervention in Kosovo, it will complete the process of transforming NATO from a defensive alliance to an all-purpose security service.

That transformation began with the Bosnia mission, which set the precedent that the alliance can conduct operations outside the geographical territory of member states. In that instance, the national government of Bosnia *approved* of the intervention. But in the case of Kosovo, the

national government of Yugoslavia adamantly *opposes* intervention. If NATO intervenes anyway, it will set a new precedent: that the alliance can conduct an ''out-of-area'' operation inside a sovereign country *even if the country in question objects.*

That dangerous enlargement of NATO's purview threatens to drag the United States into more parochial conflicts in the future. Indeed, Kosovo is just one of a number of places around the world where an ethnic or religious group that constitutes a majority within a subsection of an established state has engaged in a violent effort to achieve national independence: Armenians have done so in Azerbaijan, Basques in Spain, Christians in Sudan, Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Kashmiri Muslims in India, Karens in Burma, Tibetans and Uighurs in China, Chechens in Russia, Abkhazis in Georgia, and so on. If the United States intervenes in Kosovo, it will set the precedent that Americans are now willing to intervene in secessionist conflicts even when the presiding government says no. If applied consistently, that precedent could pull the United States into dozens of ethnic conflicts around the globe. Congress should therefore resist this latest effort to enlarge NATO's purview.

Serbia

Congress should resist efforts to impose new economic sanctions against Serbia for its crackdown on Kosovar separatists. During the 1992–95 war in Bosnia, the West imposed heavy sanctions on Serbia, but those measures caused young people to leave the country and impoverished the general population, not Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, who became enormously rich from the black market in smuggled imports.

Milosevic's grip on power also tightened when sanctions were last imposed. He controlled several newspapers and television stations, and the sanctions allowed him to blame external forces for his failed economic policies. Leading Cuban émigrés in the United States have long pointed to similar tactics used by Castro's regime to explain away Cuba's economic woes.

Economic sanctions also undermined the ability of the democratic opposition inside Serbia to organize and mount political campaigns against Milosevic and his party. With the middle class and the private business sector eviscerated by sanctions, contributions to the opposition all but dried up. Moreover, the international embargo on gasoline made it difficult for local opposition leaders to travel around the country to mobilize support. More significant, sanctions made it harder for the opposition to persuade

voters. As Boran Karadzole, a former high-ranking Yugoslav trade official, notes,

> The years of isolation during the war brought about a general drop in the level of political enlightenment, and especially our awareness of what's going on in the world. . . . It's made people all the more susceptible to cliches.

In the end, imposing new economic sanctions on Serbia will again prove counterproductive, entrenching Milosevic, further impoverishing Serbia's average citizens, and undermining the democratic opposition. Most of all, economic sanctions will once more encourage Serbia's young people to emigrate elsewhere, thus draining the small nation of the people most receptive to democratic change—its youth. The bottom line is that imposing new economic sanctions will be inimical to the emergence of a democratic Yugoslavia.

Instead of imposing economic sanctions, the United States should undertake a program of constructive engagement; that is, promote vigorous trade and investment in conjunction with quite diplomacy. Avoiding the reflexive impulse to levy sanctions on Serbia will allow influences that are corrosive of Milosevic's regime to be felt. Not only will unfettered trade and investment expose the Serbian people to the Western ideals of limited government and the rule of law; it will foster economic growth as well. The subsequent emergence of a private business sector and middle class will create another source of political pressure inside Serbia and provide a desperately needed pool of financial support for the democratic opposition.

Albania

Congress should urge the Clinton administration to reverse its military and intelligence ties with Albania. News reports indicate that Kosovo's guerrillas are incapable of mounting a full-scale war that will spill out of Kosovo. The real threat for a widening conflict in the Balkans comes from Albania. Former Albanian president Sali Berisha refers to the fighting in Kosovo as a ''holy war'' and defines the ''Albanian nation'' as including not only Albania but also Kosovo and western Macedonia, both of which are dominated by ethnic Albanians. He has also called Albania's current prime minister, Fatos Nano, an ''enemy of the Albanian nation'' for failing to support Kosovo's secessionist forces and has given his family farm in northern Albania to the KLA to use as a military training ground. Berisha's

rhetoric and decision to turn over his birthplace to the rebels are part of his skillful manipulation of the Kosovo crisis to mount a political comeback.

Despite that political backdrop, NATO is helping to re-equip Albania's military, and the alliance recently conducted war games with Albania's army, thereby raising its confidence and improving its war-fighting skills. The Central Intelligence Agency has also tightened ties with Albania's SHIK secret service agency, helping it to restructure and modernize its intelligence-gathering capabilities. Ironically, in carrying out such activities Washington may be inadvertently helping to rebuild the very forces that will initiate the spread of the Kosovo conflict if Berisha returns to power.

Future U.S. Policy

In 1991 Germany prematurely recognized the independence of Croatia and Slovenia and thus paved the way for the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the resulting tragedy in Bosnia. Germany thought it was helping matters by involving the international community in the Balkan dispute, expecting that that would stem the tide of war. The opposite happened.

Given the German lesson of 1991, it would be expected that Washington's policymakers would adopt a hands-off approach to new Balkan flare-ups like Kosovo. But, instead, Washington is involving itself on every level, from threatening new economic sanctions and NATO intervention to increasing military and intelligence ties with Albania. Unfortunately, such meddlesome measures can backfire. But that reality is not likely to be grasped by the Clinton administration any time soon. Congress should reverse the U.S. course in the Balkans and reject the administration's assumption that complex ethno-religious conflicts overseas can be resolved by Washington.

Suggested Readings

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—Prepared by Gary Dempsey