Crisis in Kosovo

How US policy has laid the basis for a wider war in the Balkans

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The recent atrocities carried out by Serbian security forces in Kosovo and the eruption of mass protests by the province's ethnic Albanian majority are eerily reminiscent of the tumultuous events which plunged the former Yugoslavia into civil war in 1991-1992.

Serb troops massacred some 80 Albanian men, women and children in Kosovo's Drenica region. This month's killings were part of a counterinsurgency operation carried out against the Kosovo Liberation Army, known by the Albanian acronym UCK, an armed movement advocating the territory's independence.

The chain reaction of secession and civil war which dismembered Yugoslavia at the beginning of the decade appears to have come full circle. President Slobodan Milosevic's whipping up of Serbian nationalism in relation to Kosovo provided the pretext for the unilateral secession of Slovenia and Croatia from the Yugoslav federation in 1991, followed by the republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina the ensuing year. Then came six years of atrocities, massacres and mass expulsions.

A war for control of Kosovo poses the threat of far wider carnage. Like the Serbs, the Albanians are a people divided by a number of state borders. To the southeast of Kosovo lies Albania. To the south is western Macedonia, with a predominantly Albanian population and a political setup dominated by ethnic rivalries. Montenegro to the west also has an Albanian minority.

The violent redrawing of these borders to accommodate Albanian nationalist aspirations has the potential of igniting a generalized Balkan war. Turkey and Greece, the region's historic antagonists and key NATO members, line up on opposite sides of the Serb-Albanian dispute and could also be drawn into the conflict. This in turn could touch off the long-simmering dispute between Turks and Greeks in Cyprus.

The Balkans provided the tinderbox for the First World War. It is evident that eight decades later the fundamental contradiction between world economy and the nation-state system still finds its most concentrated and malignant expression in this region.

The resurgence of the Yugoslav crisis is bound up with an intensification of global tensions. Barely a month ago, Russia's President Boris Yeltsin warned that a unilateral US military assault on Iraq posed the danger of igniting a third world war. While US officials dismissed the statement as phrase-mongering or an example of Yeltsin's well-known eccentricity, the buildup against Iraq, just as the explosion in Kosovo, demonstrates how regional crises become enmeshed in the worldwide struggle which pits the US, Western Europe, Japan and, increasingly, Russia, against one another over the control of markets and strategic sources of wealth.

One rather ominous sign of these tensions surfaced earlier this month when the Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz declared that present-day Germany was pursuing the same policy as Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, that of aggressive expansion aimed at securing "Lebensraum," or living space, in the East. Yilmaz linked the accusation to charges that Germany was blocking Turkey's entry into the European Union in order to further its own global interests.

The events in Kosovo have underscored the failure of the US-NATO intervention in the former state of Yugoslavia to resolve any of the complex questions which produced the conflicts there. This is not a matter merely of misguided initiatives or flawed policy. Rather, the failure is rooted in the impossibility of resolving the crisis through the creation of a new set of ethnically-based nation states in the region.

Washington claimed to have defused the crisis by means of the Dayton peace accords. This deal was prepared through NATO air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs, followed by the August 1995 US-backed offensive in which the Croatian army drove a quarter of a million Serb civilians from their homes in the Krajina region. These military actions were followed by an extensive round of diplomatic horse-trading with Serbia's Milosevic, Croatia's President Franjo Tudjman and their Bosnian counterpart Alija Izetbegovic. The cease-fire, imposed through this external suppression of one of the contending factions in the civil war (the Serbs), has since been enforced through the occupation of Bosnia by tens of thousands of NATO troops.

While there has been a cessation of fighting in Bosnia, there is not, in any real sense of the word, the establishment of peace. NATO troops essentially act to enforce the division of the small territory into three ethnic-based statelets, led respectively by Serb, Croat and Moslem communalist politicians.

Refugees have not been returned to their homes. The status of strategic areas such as Brcko remain undecided. This town, formerly predominantly Moslem, was overrun by the Serbs, who insist it must remain in their hands because it straddles the strategic northern corridor linking the eastern and western Serbian territories. The Moslem government asserts that it represents a crucial link to the rest of Europe. The dispute merely demonstrates the untenable character of both of these statelets. Meanwhile, a June deadline for the withdrawal of NATO forces has been postponed indefinitely.

Now Washington is threatening another military action in the Balkans. US spokesmen insist that the Clinton administration has not ruled out air strikes against Serbia to compel a change in its policy. They assert that a threat issued by President Bush in his final weeks in office to respond militarily to any Serb offensive in Kosovo remains in effect.

Once again the media is filled with statements of moral outrage over the atrocities of the Serbs. *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, who waged an editorial campaign for US military intervention in Bosnia, now calls on the Clinton administration to "act this time with the strength that can prevent disaster," advocating the use of "air power and other limited

force."

But what Washington would accomplish by bombing Serbia is far from clear. The policy of the US and the Western powers in general has become entangled in a torturous contradiction, one which is deeply rooted in the history of the Balkans.

In Kosovo, just as in the earlier wars, demands for self-determination and national independence are counterposed to conceptions of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Albanian nationalists in Kosovo claim that their rights can be assured only by forming a separate state.

The regime in Belgrade maintains that secession would dismember Serbia and abrogate the rights of the Serb minority which still constitutes ten percent of the province's population. Kosovo, it declares, is an "internal matter." Serbian nationalists seek to whip up popular support for the repression by evoking Kosovo's past as the center of Serbian religion and culture and by recalling the World War II atrocities carried out by Albanian units organised by Nazi Germany.

Serbia has exercised military rule over Kosovo since 1989, when it abolished the far-reaching autonomy which the Yugoslav regime of Marshall Tito had granted it. The move came after nationalist agitation by the ethnic Albanian leadership in Kosovo to declare the region a full-fledged republic of Yugoslavia, rather than an autonomous province of Serbia. Since the only concrete difference between the status of republic and that of autonomous province was the constitutional right to secede, the Serb nationalists in Belgrade denounced the demand as the first step toward carving up Serbia and joining Kosovo with neighboring Albania.

Albanian nationalists responded to the Serb repression by establishing a sort of parallel government, headed by Ibrahim Rugova. Formally recognized only by Albania, this shadow administration has set up a network of Albanian language schools and some health care facilities. A relationship described as "cold apartheid" has existed between the province's Albanian majority and Serb minority. This relationship is now degenerating into armed conflict.

Where does Washington line up in this conflict? While denouncing Serbia's repressive policy and threatening military retaliation, it maintains that Kosovo must remain part of Serbia. US envoy to the Balkans Robert Gelbard has denounced the Kosovo Liberation Army as "terrorists." The effect has been to encourage both sides and thereby make full-scale war all the more likely. The Albanian nationalists in Kosovo are convinced that they enjoy US support. Demonstrators carry placards reading, "NATO, where are you?" The Milosevic regime, meanwhile, has interpreted US statements denouncing terrorism as a green light for repression.

Successive American administrations have not determined their policy toward the former Yugoslavia on the basis of moral considerations or abstract diplomatic principles of "self-determination" and "territorial integrity." Rather, their actions have been driven by economic and geopolitical interests as well as domestic political considerations.

At the outset of the Yugoslav crisis in 1990-91, the Bush administration declared itself for the unity and "territorial integrity" of Yugoslavia. Its principal concern was to prevent Yugoslavia's collapse from precipitating a chaotic disintegration of the Soviet Union as well. It also saw a centralized regime in Belgrade as a necessary instrument for implementing the harsh economic conditions imposed by the IMF to secure payment of Yugoslavia's substantial foreign debts.

It shifted to supporting independence for Slovenia and Croatia, followed by Macedonia and Bosnia and Hercegovina, only after a newly reunified and assertive Germany pushed the rest of the European Union into backing Croatia's and Slovenia's unilateral secession from the Yugoslav federation.

Washington then followed suit, partly to stay in step with Bonn at a moment when it was demanding that German capital assume the bulk of the economic burden of integrating the former Soviet bloc countries into the capitalist world market. At the same time the US did not want to cede the leading political position in the region. To reaffirm American hegemony in the Balkans it seized on Bosnia, aggressively promoting its independence.

Ignored in these great power maneuvers was the complex and highly-charged character of the national question in the Balkans. "Self-determination" for Croatia, for example, meant that the sizable Croatian Serb population suddenly found itself turned, against its will, into a minority within an ethnically-defined state. The only previous embodiment of an independent Croatia had been the Nazi-backed Ustashe regime which had exterminated hundreds of thousands of Serbs. Understandable fears on the part of local Serbs provided fertile ground for the agitation of the most extreme nationalists.

Having determined that the territorial integrity of the old Yugoslav federation was no longer viable and had to give way to the right of its constituent republics to self-determination, the US and the Western European powers affirmed the territorial integrity of these republics, turning what were once internal borders into international ones. They simultaneously denied the right of the minorities within these republics-Serbs within Croatia, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia-to pursue their own "self-determination," either by forming their own separate statelets or merging their territories with the former republics where they constituted an ethnic majority.

By extending support to secession without negotiating terms with the central government or making any provisions for the rights of minority populations, the US and the other major powers set the stage for the civil wars which followed. After standing aside for three years and deploring "ethnic cleansing"in Bosnia-that is, the use of military terror to carve out ethnically homogeneous territories-Washington finally launched its direct intervention, first with air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs and then by preparing and supporting the biggest single act of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, Croatia's expulsion of the Krajina Serbs.

Now the same questions are posed even more sharply in Kosovo. While Albanians make up 90 percent of the population, none of the major powers have supported their demand for national independence. To do so would contradict the position that Yugoslavia's old republican borders must be recognized as permanent international ones

US policy in Kosovo is thus reduced to demanding an end to violence and a return to a status of autonomy which was bound up with a Yugoslav federation that has ceased to exist and which both sides have already rejected. While the US publicly condemns Milosevic's repression and hints at military action against Serbia, NATO's only concrete action has been to extend military aid to Albania and Macedonia, with the aim of cutting off support to the Kosovo rebels and preventing ethnic Albanian unrest from spreading.

Meanwhile, economic conditions throughout the region have continued to deteriorate. The unemployment rate in Kosovo itself is estimated at 80 percent while the infant mortality rate for the territory is among the highest in the world. Conditions for the working class in Serbia are little better, with mass unemployment and hyperinflation having a devastating effect on living standards. Albania remains economically prostrate after the upheavals provoked by the collapse of the pyramid schemes in that country last year.

Yugoslavia's economic disintegration in the 1980s, under the impact of mounting pressure from the IMF and the foreign banks, fueled the growth of ethnic nationalism and chauvinist politics. The ruling bureaucracies in the different Yugoslav republics sought to divert popular anger over these conditions, expressed most powerfully in a massive strike wave, along chauvinist lines.

The Yugoslav crisis has its source, on the one hand, in economic dislocations resulting from the pressure of the capitalist world market and, on the other, in the promotion of ethnic nationalism by ruling cliques

seeking to preserve their own power and establish a profitable connection with foreign capital.

Every US intervention aimed at settling ethnic and social conflict by propping up the fractured system of ethnically-based capitalist states or by rearranging them or carving out new ones is doomed to failure. Whatever Washington does in this region will only provoke new crises and bloodier conflicts.

The only rational and plausible solution to the historic crisis of the Balkans remains the one which was advanced by the Marxist movement on the eve of the First World War, that of a Balkan Federation, forged through the combined struggle of workers of every nationality for a socialist alternative to the misery and barbarism which capitalism and nationalism have created in the region.

Only such a perspective can succeed in uniting the vast majority of Serb, Albanian, Croat and Moslem workers who share common social interests and aspirations against the minority of chauvinist demagogues and criminals and the outside powers which support them.