NATO air maneuvers near Kosovo foreshadow new and wider war in the Balkans

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The exercises conducted by NATO warplanes near the borders of Kosovo signal the preparation of another military intervention in the Balkans by the US and the Western European powers. The show of force by some 80 fighter-bombers within sight of Serbian units is part of a broader plan.

NATO officials have reportedly drawn up a set of military options ranging from air strikes to “halt or disrupt” Serbian military action in Kosovo, to the enforcement of a no-fly zone or a heavy weapons exclusion zone. If a bombing campaign were initiated, it would begin against Serb artillery, armored vehicles and military installations inside Kosovo, and would be extended to targets throughout Yugoslavia if the Milosevic regime failed to submit.

Another measure under consideration is the deployment of NATO troops along Kosovo’s borders with Albania to the West and Macedonia to the south, in a bid to prevent the conflict from spreading to neighboring countries. It is estimated that at least 20,000 troops would be needed for such an operation.

Proposals have also been aired for NATO to mount a peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. This would result in NATO establishing another military protectorate over a fragment of the former Yugoslavia, just as it has done in Bosnia.

As the NATO exercise was taking place, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic arrived in Moscow for talks with the Yeltsin regime. Moscow has joined with the Western powers in calling for an end to the fighting in Kosovo, but at the same time has condemned any threat of NATO military force against Serbia. Moscow played a virtually identical role of distancing itself from NATO and conducting diplomatic talks with Belgrade on the eve of the last major NATO intervention, the massive bombing campaign directed against Bosnian Serb forces.

The past weeks have seen the Serbian regime of President Slobodan Milosevic respond with murderous brutality to the emergence of an armed separatist guerrilla force known as the Kosovo Liberation Army. Serb police and military units have killed hundreds of civilians. Entire villages have been leveled and tens of thousands have been made homeless, many of them fleeing for safety in neighboring Albania.

The aim of the Serbian military operations has been to isolate the Kosovan Albanian guerrillas from civilian support and cut off arms and supplies from neighboring Albania. As the US military knows from ample experience, such counterinsurgency campaigns often produce the opposite of their intended result.

Support for the Kosovan Liberation Army, a virtually unknown organization barely six months ago, has spread rapidly, not only in Kosovo, but in Albania as well. The fighting across the border has become the focus of political life in Albania. The opposition led by former President Sali Berisha has constituted itself as a support apparatus for the Kosovan guerrillas, working with arms smugglers to supply them with weapons and providing them with base camps inside Albania. The agitation by Berisha’s followers has forced the Albanian regime of President Fatnos Nanos to adopt an increasingly nationalistic and belligerent attitude toward Serbia.

Albania has yet to recover from the financial and political crisis that plunged the country into civil war a little over a year ago. The official government’s power extends little beyond Tirana, the capital. The operations of the Kosovan guerrillas and their Albanian backers pose the threat of renewed unrest within Albania as well as the eruption of a wider Balkan war.

Once again, as during the civil war in Bosnia, voices are being raised in both Western Europe and the US for NATO military intervention in the name of stopping ethnic cleansing and defending human rights. If such an intervention does take place, it will not be motivated by concern for Kosovo’s suffering civilian population. The US and the other NATO powers will attack Serbia and deploy forces in the region solely for the purpose of defending the strategic interests of American and Western European capitalism in the region.

During the last major NATO intervention, Washington claimed that it was acting on humanitarian grounds. The result was the largest expulsion of ethnic populations since the beginning of Yugoslavia’s breakup, culminating in the eviction of a quarter million ethnic Serbs from the Krajina region of Croatia.

The end result of US and NATO intervention in Bosnia has been to solidify the country’s partition along ethnic lines into Moslem, Croat and Serb-ruled enclaves. None of the major issues of contention—the return of refugees to their homes, the status of the strategically crucial town of Brcko—have been

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resolved. It is feared that elections scheduled for September in Brcko will only serve to re-ignite the conflict.

Washington and the Western European powers find themselves caught in a dilemma of their own making in Kosovo. From the outset of the Yugoslav crisis, they have claimed that their actions were guided by the principles of self-determination for the former republics of Yugoslavia and the sanctity of their borders. In reality, these principles merely masked the pursuit of economic and political self-interest. They adopted this policy in order to weaken the Yugoslav state and assert their own hegemony in the Balkans.

Their promotion of national self-determination for the former Yugoslav republics and support of unilateral declarations of independence first by Slovenia and Croatia and then Bosnia, together with the growth of Serbian nationalism stoked up by the former Stalinist bureaucrat Milosevic, led inevitably to civil war.

In Kosovo 90 percent of the population is ethnic Albanian. The province, however, is part of the Serb republic and is still home to an estimated 200,000 Serbs. Both Washington and Western Europe have insisted that Kosovo remain part of Serbia. They fear that redrawing borders to accommodate Kosovan Albanian demands for self-determination could trigger a domino effect. Ethnic Albanians in neighboring Macedonia, where a US-led NATO contingent of 700 troops watches the border, have also begun agitating for self-determination. With nationalist sentiment rising in Albania itself, demands for a greater Albania could ultimately spark a Balkan-wide war, drawing the region's traditional antagonists, Turkey and Greece, both NATO members, into the fighting.

Washington has remained equivocal about a Kosovan intervention. It has sought to reach a closer accommodation with the Milosevic regime in Belgrade, which has in turn cooperated with NATO operations in Bosnia. The US was in the midst of discussing the lifting of economic sanctions against Serbia when the fighting in Kosovo broke out. There are fears that if Milosevic is forced to make a humiliating climb-down over Kosovo, the principal beneficiaries will be even more rabid nationalist elements, such as the Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj.

There remains in Serbia a significant political constituency for the policy which the Belgrade regime is conducting in Kosovo. It has the support of a ruling clique made up of the old bureaucracy, war profiteers and black market capitalists, as well as the army, police and paramilitary organizations.

Nationalist agitation has also found a certain base in a population that has seen its living standards devastated since Yugoslavia's breakup. The average Yugoslav worker is surviving on barely $100 a month under conditions in which prices stand at Western European levels. According to the regime's own estimates, more than 800,000 workers remain on "compulsory paid leave," a euphemism for unemployment on subsistence benefits. Meanwhile, more than 700,000 refugees from the civil wars in Croatia and Bosnia have crowded into the country.

No doubt the distracted state of the White House, in the face of the political offensive directed against it by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the media, is playing a role in Washington's apparent indecisiveness over the latest Yugoslav crisis.

Leading the calls for military intervention have been the Western European governments, in particular that of Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, which has taken the initiative in drafting a United Nations Security Council resolution similar to the one which paved the way for the 1991 Persian Gulf war. French President Jacque Chirac, meanwhile, received the Kosovan Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova in Paris, where he declared that France was ready "to use all necessary means, including military, to reestablish peace in Kosovo."

With the turn toward intervention in Kosovo, the Yugoslav crisis has come full circle. It was a decade ago in Kosovo that the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia began to take shape. The exploitation by Milosevic of the grievances of the Serb minority in the republic fueled Serb nationalism and spurred on rival nationalist cliques in Slovenia and then Croatia. The Serbian regime's suppression of Kosovan regional autonomy was seized upon by Slovenia's Milan Kucan and Croatia's Franjo Tudjman as a justification for separating from Yugoslavia.

Germany, newly reunited and seeking to reassert its power in an area where it had historically claimed hegemony, gave its unconditional backing to Croatian and Slovenian "self-determination," accelerating their moves toward unilateral declarations of independence. Anxious not to cede leadership in the Balkans to the European powers, the US promoted Bosnian independence.

Once again, in Kosovo, European assertiveness can pave the way to an eruption of American militarism.

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