US, NATO threaten new bombing campaign against Serbia

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A flurry of meetings by the United Nations, the NATO command and the six-year-old Contact Group formed by the US, the major Western European powers and Russia, is setting the stage for another round of aerial bombardment against targets in the former Yugoslavia.

The ostensible aim of the planned NATO air strikes is to halt the crackdown by the Serbian regime of President Slobodan Milsosevic against the ethnic Albanian population in the Serb province of Kosovo. A bitter conflict has raged in the territory since February, when Serbian security forces moved in to suppress armed Albanian separatists of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

American and European leaders are today expressing indignation over Serbian atrocities against the Kosovo Albanian population, but for months the US remained silent while Serb forces carried out their offensive against the KLA. This was no mere oversight. Washington opposes the KLA's demand for an independent Kosovo, and much prefers the more moderate elected leader of the Kosovo Albanians, Ibrahim Rugova.

Some commentators have claimed, with justification, that the silence of the Clinton administration amounted to a green light for Milosevic to deliver a military defeat to the KLA so as to force the separatists to the negotiating table.

Only now that the Serb assault has created a huge and growing mass of refugees, who threaten to move across the border into Albania and destabilize the entire Balkans region, has the Clinton administration presented Milosevic with a series of ultimatums and threatened air strikes to back them up.

At the same time, Washington has dispatched its chief negotiator in the Bosnian civil war, Richard Holbrooke, to Belgrade. Holbrooke is offering Milosevic a deal that would defer for two or three years any decision on independence for Kososo. Negotiators for the Albanian majority in the province have denounced a US plan for a political settlement which would keep Kosovo in Serbia and set up a system of councils based on 'national communities.' The proposal, patterned after the 1995 Dayton accord that institutionalized the ethnic carved-up of Bosnia, would give Albanian and Serb 'national communities' a series of blocking rights to veto any decision that affected their 'vital interests.'

For all of their denunciations of Milosevic, the US, Britain and Germany made his regime one of the pillars of the Dayton accord and have relied on him to maintain the armed truce in Bosnia. In recent days, however, they have shifted toward the use of military force to drive him to the negotiating table in Kosovo.

'We have to be very, very strong here,' Clinton said last week. 'We saw in Bosnia what works in dealing with Mr. Milosevic.'

Clinton was referring to the air attacks carried out by NATO against Serb population centers throughout Bosnia in August and September of 1995. Then, as now, the bombings were prepared by saturation media exposures of war crimes by Serb forces against civilians.

There is no doubt that the Milosevic regime has carried out brutal killings in Kosovo. Moreover, a humanitarian catastrophe looms over the Yugoslav territory as tens of thousands of civilians displaced by military operations confront the onset of the Balkan winter without shelter or adequate food supplies.

Yet no spokesman for Washington, London, NATO or the UN has explained how lobbing cruise missiles or dropping bombs on Serb targets either in Kosovo or Serbia proper will ameliorate the situation. Instead, images of massacre victims and suffering refugees are exploited to further a predetermined military intervention under the slogan that 'something must be done' to stop the killing.

In the public discussion of these events, the questions are never seriously posed of how the present crisis came to be and what role the policies of Washington and the Western European powers played in shaping this conflict.

The supposed impetus for imminent military action was the execution of 18 ethnic Albanian civilians by Serb troops. In the context of the bloodletting that has taken place throughout Yugoslavia over the course of nearly 10 years, however, this barbaric crime was not one of the largest massacres. Similar atrocities against ethnic Serbs, who make up more than 10 percent of Kosovo's population, have gone virtually unreported. Last month, for example, the bodies of 34 Serb civilians killed by the KLA guerrillas were found in a canal at Glodjane.

The KLA has pursued a definite strategy of using attacks on Serb police and civilians in order to drive out the Serb minority and provoke a military crackdown, with the aim of precipitating Western intervention.

All sides in the civil war that has raged across Yugoslavia for nearly a decade have carried out such actions. Communalist factions on all sides have employed such means in their attempts to carve out new states based on ethnically homogeneous populations. In Yugoslavia--where Serbs, Croats, Muslims and other peoples had lived together and intermarried over generations--borders can be redrawn on this basis only through the most bloody methods.

The US and Western Europe, which once again are posing as the saviors of the region, have by no means acted as innocent bystanders in this conflict. The country's dismemberment along ethnic lines was driven by economic pressures exerted by the major capitalist powers on the Yugoslav economy, and then politically supported and encouraged by the US and Western European governments. Ex-Stalinist bureaucrats turned ethnic nationalist politicians like Milosevic in Serbia and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia were cultivated by the US State Department in the interest of bringing an end to the last vestiges of 'Yugoslav socialism.'

Clinton cites the 1995 US bombings as an example of 'what works' in the former Yugoslavia, but that military campaign in a fundamental sense laid the groundwork for the latest conflict in Kosovo. The aerial assault in Bosnia three years ago was portrayed as a response to a mortar attack on the Sarjevo marketplace in which 40 people died. The carnage was blamed on the Serbs, though many sources, including several NATO military observers, have since charged that Moslem-led forces staged the attack as a means of precipitating US intervention.

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The US air assault had in reality been in preparation for months, as is the case with the present planned bombings in Kosovo. Its aim was to solidify gains won by the Croatian regime some months earlier in driving hundreds of thousands of Serbs from their homes in the Krajina region, and to force both the Milosevic regime and the Bosnian Serbs to accept US plans for a final ethnic carve-up of Yugoslav territory.

This ethnic partition was finalized at the Dayton conference, in which Serbia's Milosevic, Tudjman of Croatia and Bosnian Moslem leader Alija Izetbegovic were brought together to accept new borders between ethnic enclaves and the deployment of NATO troops to enforce them. Those Serb, Moslem and Croat civilians who found themselves on the wrong sides of these borders were, for the most part, driven from their homes.

Even as the US and NATO threaten to bomb the Serbs over their actions in Kosovo, the institutionalization of ethnic enclaves at the heart of the Dayton accord is fostering a new buildup of tensions between Moslems, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia. US policy there received a severe blow last month when hard-line chauvinist supporters of Radovan Karadzic defeated the incumbent head of the Serb enclave, Biljana Plavsic, in elections to regional and national assemblies.

In his recently published book *To End a War*, Richard Holbrooke described a negotiating strategy characterized by indifference to the complex social and historical questions posed by Yugoslavia's breakup, and a grotesque demonization of the Serbs. 'The Western mistake over the previous four years had been to treat the Serbs as rational people with whom one could argue, negotiate, compromise, and agree,' Holbrooke writes. 'In fact they respected only force or an unambiguous and credible threat to use it.'

The Kosovo question was deliberately omitted from the horse-trading in Dayton, even though the outbreak of military conflict there had been widely predicted. On the one hand, Washington did not want to provoke a split with Milosevic. On the other hand, imposing the criteria of ethnically defined borders in relation to Kosovo held even greater dangers than in the rest of former Yugoslavia. Pan-Albanian nationalism has the potential of destabilizing the entire region.

Already, the Albanian separatist guerrillas are operating from across the border in Albania, which is itself gripped by intense political crisis, as well as in Macedonia. The spread of Albanian nationalism to that territory has the potential of destroying the Macedonian regime and calling into question its borders with Greece, Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia. There are real fears that such a development could trigger a new round of Balkan wars with the potential of drawing in the region's historic rivals, Greece and Turkey, and ultimately Russia and the major Western powers.

Over the past 10 years the West has pursued a policy holding 'self-determination' of the various ethnic, religious and linguistic populations making up Yugoslavia to be fundamental right superseding the old Federal Republic's 'sovereignty and integrity.' As first Slovenia, then Croatia, and finally Bosnia seceded from the Yugoslav federation, with Western support, the US and the European Union adopted the new position that the borders of the former Yugoslav republics had become sacrosanct. Combining support for 'self-determination' defined according to ethic nationalism with recognition of unchangeable republican borders fueled the massacres, terror and military expulsions of civilian populations that became known as 'ethnic cleansing.'

From the First World War onward, Washington has invoked self-determination not to defend the rights of oppressed peoples, but to further its own strategic interests against its imperialist rivals and, later, the Soviet Union. In the aftermath of the First World War, Woodrow Wilson advocated self-determination--solely for the peoples of Europe--as a means of dissolving the old Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires and fomenting nationalism among smaller nationalities as a counterbalance to the growing influence of socialism. After World War II, the US invoked self-determination, again selectively, in its bid to establish economic and political control over the former colonial empires of Britain and France.

Once again in the former Yugoslavia, supposedly democratic principles are presented as the basis for a US policy that is driven by the economic and geopolitical interests of American capitalism.

If the US carries the latest military buildup through to bombing the Serbs, it will not be to protect the Kosovan Albanians or to bring peace to the Balkans. Observers on the ground in Kosovo report that among the Albanians themselves there is fear that NATO bombs will either strike them as well as the Serbs, or provoke the Serb forces into further retaliation.

US action in Kosovo is an expression of a policy of containment. Washington's aim is to prevent the ethnic warfare and violent redrawing of borders in the former Yugoslavia--developments that US policy aided and abetted--from spilling over the old Yugoslav borders into the rest of southern Europe.

More fundamentally, US militarism in the Balkans is driven by Washington's desire to reassert its political and economic hegemony in that region, first proclaimed with the elaboration of the Truman Doctrine in 1947, when Washington supplanted London as the principal imperialist power there.

Moreover, by flexing its military might in the former Yugoslavia, the US is sending a signal throughout the Eastern and Central European states that once made up the Soviet bloc. It does not intend to cede these territories to its imperialist rivals, despite being outstripped by the far more extensive penetration of Western European, and particularly German, capital.

There are no grounds for lending the slightest credibility to claims by London or Washington that their preparations for military intervention against the Serbs are motivated by humanitarian concerns. One only need ask why similar concerns were never sparked by the deaths of hundreds of thousands in Rwanda and the Congo, or by the brutal military campaign unleashed by Russia against the separatists in Chechnya. Why are Clinton and Blair outraged by massacres of ethnic Albanians in Serbia, yet both give political and military support to similar atrocities by the Turkish military against the Kurds? Both the US and Britain have a long history of colonial wars and counterinsurgency campaigns that make the violence in Kosovo pale by comparison.

Concern for the suffering people of Kosovo cannot justify support for US air strikes against the Serbs. The argument that 'something must be done now' or that American military action is the only 'practical' solution ignores the hard reality that such military action will only exacerbate the underlying contradictions that have given rise to the Yugoslav wars and lay the groundwork for even more bitter conflicts in the future.

The last 10 years of ethnic warfare in the former Yugoslavia have demonstrated the dead end of every attempt to answer social deprivation and oppression with national chauvinism and the illusion of 'self-determination' based on ethnic, national, racial or religious identity.

The only way out of the tragedy that imperialism and ethnic nationalism have created in the Balkans lies in the struggle to unite the working peoples of the region. This can be achieved only on the basis of a common program that addresses the conditions of poverty, unemployment, social inequality and war that face all workers--Serb, Albanian, Croat and Bosnian Moslem alike. The bitter experiences of the last decade are creating a new working class constituency for such a socialist and internationalist program, and preparing a new upsurge in the class struggle against all the regimes that have based themselves on ethnic demagogy.

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