

The Holbrooke-Milosevic agreement on Kosovo

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A deal between US envoy Richard Holbrooke and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic has averted--at least for the moment--NATO's threat to bomb targets in the former Yugoslavia. Widely presented in the media as a diplomatic coup for the American diplomat and investment banker, the agreement has resolved none of the deep-seated problems in Kosovo, much less in the rest of the region.

Under the terms of the settlement, the Milosevic regime is to withdraw security forces that it sent into the province to combat the armed ethnic Albanian separatists of the Kosovo Liberation Army and call police forces in the province back to their garrisons. Belgrade has agreed to allow 2,000 civilian monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, who have the mission of verifying compliance. NATO spy flights and a military rapid reaction force deployed in the region will back them up.

The political future of Kosovo is somewhat less defined under the agreement. Milosevic has ostensibly pledged to hold elections and negotiate a settlement with politicians claiming to represent the ethnic Albanian majority in the territory, which is internationally recognized as part of Serbia's territory. While US officials have stressed that these negotiations are to create some form of autonomy, Milosevic has portrayed the agreement as a guarantee of Serbia's territorial integrity and its continued control over Kosovo.

Spokesmen for ethnic Albanian political formations expressed skepticism that the deployment of international monitors would prevent a renewal of the fighting, and indicated they would reject any US peace plan that falls short of granting the territory national independence, an outcome Washington has explicitly opposed.

Ibrahim Rugova, the self-styled 'president' of the Republic of Kosovo, whose nonviolent tactics have been embraced by the major powers, has called for NATO ground troops to be sent into Kosovo as the only means of defending the ethnic Albanians from Serbian security forces.

The American Ambassador to Macedonia, Christopher Hill, has been given the task of imposing a US-brokered deal on both Milosevic and the ethnic Albanians. The outlines of the plan include a three-year period of increased autonomy before any discussion on the territory's final status. The majority of Kosovo's Albanian nationalist politicians have demanded that the territory's population, 90 percent of whom are ethnic Albanian, be given the right to vote in a referendum on national independence after three years.

While Milosevic may have made some concessions under threat of NATO bombardment, it is also the case that cruise missile attacks and B-52 bombing runs offered little in terms of a solution suiting Washington and the major Western European powers. Air power, in and of itself, has proven inadequate to change the situation on the ground in similar conflicts. NATO's options, to the extent that it genuinely wanted to change the map of the Balkans, lay either in protracted and intense bombardment aimed at crippling Serbia, or putting ground troops into Kosovo.

There was no consensus within NATO for either course of action. Italy and Germany held out until the last moment on giving their go-ahead for a NATO operation against Serb forces. In the case of Italy, the vote in favor of NATO military action was facilitated by the fall of Romano Prodi's government. Had Prodi won his vote of confidence and hung onto his parliamentary majority, he would have been less likely to risk losing votes from the Rifondazione Comunista

and others by backing a bombardment.

In Germany, support for the action was mustered largely thanks to the work of Joschka Fischer, the leader of the Green Party, who is widely expected to become the country's next foreign minister. Mr. Fischer has been one of those seeking to lead the former pacifist protesters of the Greens into supporting a more 'enlightened' revival of German imperialism.

Both Holbrooke and President Clinton presented the threat of NATO air strikes and the entire US initiative in Kosovo as a matter of humanitarian concern for the suffering Albanian population. As with American interventions in Somalia, Bosnia and elsewhere, such justifications are a self-serving cover for the defense of US strategic interests.

The killings in Kosovo have been going on for the last eight months and evidence of human rights violations have been relayed to Washington by satellite photos and intelligence analysts throughout this period. US intervention in the crisis was driven by concern that the growing numbers of refugees would spill over into Macedonia, where there is also a large ethnic Albanian minority, and into Albania itself. The widening of the conflict would create the danger of a war extending well beyond the former Yugoslavia and calling into question many of southern Europe's borders.

Prosecuting the NATO bombing campaign, however, presented the Clinton administration with a difficult set of choices. For all the media demonization of Milosevic, the Serbian president has served as a linchpin for the Dayton accords that divided Bosnia into ethnic cantons and, at least temporarily, froze the civil war there. A serious attack on the Serbian regime held the danger of further destabilizing Bosnia and the rest of the region.

At the same time Moscow, which has upheld its own historic interests in the region by aligning itself with Serbia, had threatened to lift its arms embargo on the Milosevic regime and reconsider its cooperation with the Western powers in Europe.

In terms of its domestic political needs, the prospect of dropping bombs and firing cruise missiles against the Serbs held an obvious attraction for the embattled Clinton presidency. A military assault in the former Yugoslavia held the promise of diverting political attention from the growing threat of impeachment and placating some of the right-wing political criticism of

Clinton.

The Holbrooke-Milosevic deal may be picked up by elements of the Republican Party as another factional issue in the internecine struggle taking place in Washington. Most of Clinton's Republican opponents, however, have opposed further deployment of US ground troops in the region and have advanced no alternative policy.

See Also:

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