

War in Kosovo draws nearer

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Following the renewed breakdown of the Kosovo conference in Paris, the danger of a bloody war in the Balkans, with incalculable consequences, draws nearer. Despite intensive last minute diplomatic efforts to avoid a military conflict, the logic of events is leading inevitably to war.

The Kosovo conference, which met for the first time February 6 in Rambouillet, outside Paris, was only convened because of a NATO military ultimatum. NATO had threatened massive air attacks if the Serb government and representatives of the Kosovo Albanians did not accept an agreement based on autonomy for the region. Now the realisation of this threat is within reach--and it appears that the representatives of the Great Powers have given no serious consideration to the results and consequences of such a step.

Two deadlines for an ultimatum had expired on February 20 and 23 respectively without a military intervention by NATO. Neither of the parties to the conflict were prepared to sign the autonomy deal put before them at Rambouillet by the Balkan contact group--consisting of the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia. The Kosovo Albanians were not prepared to accept a deal involving autonomy, insisted on a referendum for complete independence and also expressed reservations over the proposed disarming of the KLA guerrilla army. The Serb government rejected the planned stationing of a 28,000-strong NATO military force as an unacceptable invasion of its national sovereignty.

The conference was postponed for three weeks and a new round of intense diplomatic activity began.

The United States had a word with the Kosovo Albanians, and through a combination of concessions and extensive guarantees tried to persuade them to sign the treaty. The underground KLA, a short time ago still designated a terrorist organisation, was recognised diplomatically and invited to an official visit in Washington; former Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole, considered sympathetic to the Albanian cause, was sent to Pristina as a mediator.

There were also systematic efforts to influence Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. German Foreign Minister

Joseph Fischer, in his function as the president of the European Union Council, visited Milosevic and tried to win his agreement through the offer of an intensified integration of Yugoslavia into Europe. The US sent Richard Holbrooke to Belgrade, the man who had previously worked out the Dayton agreement for Bosnia with Milosevic.

However on March 15, when the Kosovo conference reassembled in Paris, the sides were further apart than ever. The Serbs continued to reject the stationing of foreign troops on their territory and also questioned parts of the political regulations which had been agreed in Rambouillet.

The Albanian delegation said it was ready to sign the deal and then did so on Thursday evening, March 18. As a result, however, the prospects of a diplomatic solution have not improved, but rather worsened. After one side had signed the deal the only option left to the Serbs was to sign or reject it as it stood. If the treaty were to be renegotiated, the signature of the Albanians would be in doubt.

The conference in Paris has been once again postponed for a few days in order to give Belgrade time to think things over. But hardly any of the observers believe that the Serb government will change its position. An agreement by the Serbs to the Kosovo deal would be equivalent to the loss of a region regarded as an integral part of their territory since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Formally Kosovo would remain a part of the Serb state, but in practice it would in every respect be freed from the influence of Belgrade.

As a result the military option more and more assumes centre stage. If NATO doesn't carry out the threatened attack, then according to the organisation's strategists it will irreparably lose credibility. If NATO forces strike, on the other hand, then the consequences are no less dramatic. The prospect arises of a conflagration in the Balkans with unpredictable international repercussions.

The plans of the military include massive air strikes on the positions of the Yugoslav army. The first wave of attack by unmanned rockets has as its aim the "decapitation" of the Yugoslav air force. Should the radar and communications facilities be destroyed, then fighter bombers are set to wipe out army installations and military airfields. For this purpose over 400 planes, including six B-52 bombers, the entire US

6th fleet and a French aircraft carrier, are ready in the Mediterranean. According to a step by step plan, military pressure is to be steadily increased until Belgrade gives way.

Many of the envisaged targets--such as the radar air defence facility (equipped with American technology) near Belgrade, the Slatina military airport near Pristina and the Zastava ammunition factory in Kragujevac--are situated close to inhabited areas. Thus a high number of civilian casualties would have to be anticipated.

Nevertheless air strikes do not offer the slightest guarantee that the Serb government will concede to the demands of the Contact group. This is the considered opinion of NATO military experts.

In addition Serbia has a few military trump cards in its hand. It has little to offer in the way of a challenge to the superior NATO air power, but it does possess relatively effective ground troops. On the border to Kosovo over the past few days large numbers of infantry and tank units have drawn together--according to American sources between 30,000 and 40,000 soldiers--threatening to deal with the KLA fighters in Kosovo should NATO intervene. Attacks on the assembled NATO troops in Macedonia are also not excluded.

Such a development can hardly be checked simply with air strikes. Ground troops are much more difficult to fight from the air than fixed military installations, irrespective of the fact that a large number of civilian casualties must be predicted. Leading military experts have warned for some time that a military success in Kosovo would only be possible when air strikes are accompanied by a massive invasion of ground troops. But at the moment neither the American nor European governments are prepared to go so far. In view of the prospects of heavy casualties they would invariably be confronted with considerable domestic political difficulties.

There are also those who regard the aim of the air strikes as the changing of the relation of military forces in the region. In the German newspaper *Die Welt*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to US President Jimmy Carter in the 1970s, called for "intensive attacks on Serb troop concentrations, command and control centres, on large military convoys, on the main roads between north and south, including bridges and mountain passes.... It must have the effect of so effectively hindering the Serb military operation that the KLA will be able to use the situation to their advantage."

Such a course, which flows from the logic of current developments, would inevitably lead to the destabilisation of the entire region--something which the Great Powers have sought to avoid up until now.

Above all the Russian government, which supported the

political part of the autonomy agreement but strictly rejects any military intervention, has warned for some time of this danger. "Problems which have accumulated over decades cannot be resolved with bombing," said Boris Majorski, the Russian delegate to the Paris talks. He warned that the separation of Kosovo with NATO military assistance would establish a precedent. "When the result is a Great Albania, then why not a Great Croatia or Great Serbia?" he asked.

Also amongst the European governments--in particular France--there are considerable misgivings about military strikes. They fear that a precedent will be created whereby a nation undergoes military assault because it will not accept the presence of foreign troops on its soil--and under conditions where there is no United Nations mandate for the operation.

It is difficult to predict developments over the coming days. The situation resembles a powder keg which could explode with the slightest spark. Diplomats have made a comparison with a game of poker, with both sides playing what amounts to a high-stakes game, and whereby neither side has any fixed course of action.

It is remarkable, nevertheless, that politicians such as German Foreign Minister Fischer, who just a few years ago defended pacifist positions, now proceed with far fewer scruples than the most conservative of the military representatives. The latter have continually warned against a military ultimatum. It is false to threaten measures, they say, the effectiveness of which are dubious, and under conditions where no alternative exists. Fischer, on the other hand, is one of the keenest advocates of the ultimatum on the Serbs. Together with the SPD, the Greens have agreed to send German troops, fighter planes and tanks to the Balkans--a move which the previous German conservative administration could only dream of.

Now the real prospect emerges of these troops being drawn into serious military conflict. Whether Fischer has really taken this into account--one can only speculate. But one thing is sure, his willing capitulation to the logic of military escalation can be relied upon in the future.



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