

Clinton signals a shift to a wider war against Serbia

The Editorial Board
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Amid reports that the air bombardment of Serb forces has been far less effective than originally claimed, President Clinton on Tuesday indicated that the United States is preparing to vastly expand its military offensive in Serbia.

Speaking at a State Department ceremony in Washington, Clinton for the first time publicly suggested that his administration was preparing to drop its official policy of Kosovan autonomy and embrace the demand of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) for the secession of the province and its recognition as an independent state.

Clinton dismissed out of hand the diplomatic efforts of Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov to broker a cease-fire and warned the Serbs that failure to accept US-NATO demands, including a 28,000-strong NATO occupation force on Serb territory, meant "the prospect for international support for Serbia's claim to Kosovo [was] increasingly jeopardized."

Clinton's choice of words was significant and, from the standpoint of Serbia, highly provocative. Kosovo has been internationally recognized as a constituent part of Serbia since 1912. Clinton implicitly, but deliberately, placed a question mark over Serb sovereignty by relegating its authority to a mere "claim."

A policy of severing Kosovo from Serbia dictates an immense intensification of the war, including the introduction of ground troops, the military occupation of Kosovo and its transformation into a de facto protectorate of the United States. Such a strategy would require a broadening of the war into a general attack on Serbia, with a massive toll in civilian casualties. There are growing indications that, despite Clinton's claims to the contrary, this is the direction of American policy.

Virtually every day since the onset of bombing last

Wednesday has seen the introduction of new weaponry. Over the past 48 hours the Pentagon has ordered five B-1 bombers and additional air defense-jamming planes and refueling tankers to Europe for expanded air strikes. A US A-10 "Warthog" aircraft, designed to fly at low altitudes and destroy tanks, took off for the first time on Monday.

Even more significantly, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said on Monday that the US was considering the introduction of Apache attack helicopters. The Apache is a short-range tactical weapon that requires substantial support from troops on the ground. One army officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the press, "If you go Apache, you've walked across a threshold."

Clinton and his NATO allies have adopted a posture of shock and dismay over the Serb response to their bombing campaign, undertaken to force Belgrade to accede to Western control over Kosovo. This pose is hardly credible. In the first place, it cannot be squared with their depiction of Serb ruler Slobodan Milosevic as a power-mad demon who revels in shedding the blood of innocent civilians. Given such an enemy, what other outcome could Clinton and company have expected?

Moreover, every eruption of national strife since the breakup of Yugoslavia, which began eight years ago with the Western-backed secession of Slovenia and Croatia, has seen bloody outbreaks of ethnic cleansing on all sides--on the part of Croats, Bosnian Moslems and Serbs. Where it has suited American policy, as in Croatia's mass expulsion of the Krajina Serbs in 1995, such atrocities have been carried out with direct US support.

US and NATO statements of surprise and indignation serve two interrelated purposes. They fuel the media

campaign to manipulate the public and build support for a wider war, and they promote the illusion that the US and NATO are being forced to systematically expand their military offensive as a "humanitarian" response to Serb aggression against the Albanian Kosovars.

The attempt of the US and NATO to deny any responsibility for the human disaster that is unfolding in Kosovo is perhaps the most sickening expression of the cynicism and hypocrisy that characterize their actions. It is not a matter of offering the slightest support or apologetics for the chauvinism and brutality of the Milosevic regime. Serb policy in Kosovo has, since 1989, been characterized by a combination of repression and provocation. And, partly in response to anti-Serb actions by the KLA and increased pressure from the US, Belgrade has in recent weeks intensified its attacks on the Kosovan Albanians.

But it is ludicrous to deny the plain fact that the flight of Albanians out of Kosovo only took on massive proportions after NATO commenced its bomb assault last Wednesday. US and NATO officials cannot make a credible case that they initiated the bombing to prevent Serb atrocities against the ethnic Albanians. Even as they in one breath make such claims, in the next breath they acknowledge that bombing alone cannot halt the Serb depredations that are alleged to be causing the flood of refugees.

The military assault inflamed the situation inside Kosovo, provoking an intensification of Serb attacks on Albanian civilians. But other factors are also at work, including the activities of the KLA--encouraged by the United States--and the impact of the bombing itself. It is a tragic fact that every war produces a refugee crisis, and the US-led war has turned Kosovo into a battleground.

Some American pundits are now declaring that the US made a terrible miscalculation and simply did not anticipate the human disaster that its air war would produce. All the more reason, they argue, for the US and NATO to quickly move ground troops into the province.

Even if one accepts such claims, the culpability of Washington and its NATO allies is by no means lessened. In that case the world is confronted with a colossal combination of recklessness and ignorance. To borrow the words of Talleyrand, the US government is

preparing to rectify a mistake by means of a crime.



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