

The United States and the war in the Balkans: On the road to catastrophe

The Editorial Board

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It has taken but two weeks for the bombing campaign initiated at the behest of the United States to provoke a massive refugee crisis and draw the entire Balkans region to the brink of all-out war. The stated military aims of the US and its NATO allies are being reformulated on a daily basis, while the war assumes ever more barbaric dimensions.

There should be no mistake: the masses of people in Europe and the United States are being dragged into a catastrophe of incalculable proportions. This is the price humanity is paying for the pursuit of US imperialist interests by an utterly reckless ruling elite.

The White House pledges of yesterday are controverted by the declarations of today. Thus Clinton's disavowals of plans to introduce ground troops are, without discussion or explanation, supplanted by the announced dispatch of a 2,000-man US Army force to deploy Apache attack helicopters against Serb forces in Kosovo.

Albania is to be turned into a US-NATO garrison, with the dispatch of 8,000 troops, while the NATO force in Macedonia is expanded and the bombing of Belgrade and other Serbian cities intensified.

From one day to the next developments in the war defy the expectations of US policymakers, who seek to rectify their previous miscalculations with a further exertion of military force. This, in turn, creates new conditions of chaos, mass suffering and political destabilization throughout the region. Tensions are heightened with other regional powers, above all Russia. Washington's response is a further escalation of the war, dictated by the need to maintain US "credibility."

The widening conflagration unfolds before the eyes of a public which is dazed and disoriented by a vast media propaganda campaign and barely able to keep up with the spiral of events. But the very speed of developments reveals that the US-led war drive has a momentum of its own.

One indication of the disaster looming ahead is the tragic dimensions of what has already unfolded in less than a month's time. On March 18 the US and NATO announced that a peace agreement had been signed with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), requiring that the Yugoslav

government restore autonomy to Kosovo and accept the deployment of 28,000 NATO troops in the Serbian province. After three years (during which the KLA would consolidate its power under US and NATO protection) the separatists' demand for an independent Kosovo would be addressed. This unilateral agreement was presented to Belgrade as an ultimatum, backed by the threat of NATO bombing.

Clinton, US National Security Adviser Samuel Berger and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright calculated that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic would either submit to their terms in order to avoid an air attack, or quickly yield once the bombing had begun. Milosevic refused to back down, and the air assault was launched on March 24.

In an address to the nation that day, Clinton told the American people that the purpose of the bombing was to "degrade" Serbian military capabilities and force Belgrade to accept the agreement signed in France. However Belgrade responded, to the apparent surprise of the US, with a military offensive against the ethnic Albanian population of Kosovo. The result was precisely what the bombing was supposed to prevent--a massive exodus of Kosovars into neighboring Albania, Macedonia and the Yugoslav republic of Montenegro.

When the initial bombing of Serb forces in Kosovo failed to produce the desired results, the US insisted that the bombing be extended to Belgrade and other urban centers in Serbia. Since then the war aims of the US and NATO have expanded along with the escalation of their military offensive.

Washington and NATO are now officially demanding the safe return of the hundreds of thousands of refugees to their homes in Kosovo. Unofficially various NATO sources are calling for the use of NATO troops to "escort" the ethnic Albanians back to their villages and towns, and the establishment of a protectorate in all or part of the province, to be policed by US and NATO forces. Others are declaring that the policy of Kosovan autonomy should be explicitly scrapped in favor of independence, and the *Washington Post* reports that discussions are taking place within the Clinton

administration to make the ouster of Milosevic one of the objectives of the war.

A growing chorus of US politicians, policymakers and media spokesmen are denouncing these measures as inadequate, and demanding the preparation of a full-scale ground assault on Kosovo and Serbia itself. Typical was a column published in Sunday's *Washington Post* by Clinton's former Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Under the headline "Whatever It Takes," Christopher wrote: "We--NATO and the United States--must prevail in Kosovo. We must do so unambiguously, using whatever force is necessary to accomplish this goal."

There are a host of questions not addressed by Christopher and the other advocates of a ground invasion. What, in the first instance, are the implications for the Balkans?

Are Christopher and his co-thinkers talking about the carpet-bombing of Yugoslavia? Are they including the use of tactical or even strategic nuclear weapons?

How do those who argue for Milosevic's removal intend to accomplish this task, and at what price? The only logical conclusion that flows from such demands is the long-term occupation of Serbia and its transformation into a de facto colony of the United States.

Such a policy would require the indefinite deployment of hundreds of thousands of American and NATO troops in a hostile environment. How many thousands of American and European soldiers are US policymakers prepared to sacrifice under the banner of "whatever it takes?" How many thousands, or millions, of Serbs?

Even if one assumes that a US-NATO force could secure a rapid military victory, which is by no means self-evident, the conquest of Serbia would create a whole new set of explosive conditions. What measures, for example, would be taken to respond to external forces and governments that provided aid and comfort to the defeated Serbs, who would undoubtedly establish a government-in-exile? Would attacks on American troops in Serbia require thrusts into Rumania, or Bulgaria?

Critical issues are raised, moreover, that go well beyond the confines of southeastern Europe. What about Russia? How long would it take before a US-NATO invasion of Serbia produced a full-scale military confrontation with Moscow, which, it should be remembered, continues to deploy a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons?

Clinton, Albright and company give complacent assurances that events in the Balkans would never bring Russia to the point of military conflict with the West. Here ignorance merges with arrogance, producing an incendiary combination. The US proclaims that the fate of Kosovo, thousands of miles from its borders, is a crucial US interest, while denying that Russia, whose geo-political interests in

the Balkans go back hundreds of years, has vital concerns in the region. US policymakers seem to overlook the fact that for 45 years the Balkans formed a critical part of the defense perimeter of the Soviet Union. Still earlier in the century, Russia entered the First World War in response to a foreign attack on its Serb ally.

Nor is there any public discussion of the domestic implications of a US-led ground war in the Balkans. An invasion and occupation of Serbia would inevitably draw hundreds of thousands of American soldiers into a combat situation that would last for years. Such a venture could not possibly be sustained on the basis of a volunteer army. It would require the reinstatement of the military draft.

All-out war would, moreover, have vast economic and social ramifications, to the detriment of the working population. There would be a vast increase in military expenditures, at the expense of what remains of social programs such as Medicare and Social Security. Every war generates inflation, which in turn pushes up interest rates. This would quickly undermine the stock market boom, which has been sustained by an environment of low interest rates and cheap credit. Deep recession and mass unemployment would follow.

Anyone inclined to take for good coin the assurances of Clinton that the escalating military campaign in the Balkans will be relatively painless for the US population should recall other major ground wars of the past half-century. The United States stumbled into a war with China after General Douglas MacArthur had assured Truman in 1950 there was no prospect that Chinese troops would intervene in Korea. Vietnam began with the introduction of 16,000 US advisers, but there too, miscalculations, blunders and a vast overestimation of the efficacy of sheer military power to achieve America's aims became the starting point for a bloody conflagration.

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