

# Why is Europe bombing Serbia?

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One victim of NATO's military action in Kosovo is the pretension of the European powers to stand independently of American firepower. The growing economic rivalry between Europe and the United States, intensified by the launch of the euro and a series of trade disputes, has provoked calls for Europe to develop a military capacity comparable with its economic weight.

Overshadowed for many years by the military strength of the Soviet Union and the United States, the European powers took the 1991 Gulf War as a signal to return to the scene of many old imperial wars and reassert themselves through the traditional methods of conspiracy, mercenary armies, proxy wars and outright intimidation.

During the 1990s the European powers increasingly sought to advance their own interests against Europe's rivals and to forge some degree of military cohesion as a counterweight to the preponderant strength of American firepower. However, the Balkan wars of the 90s witnessed a series of occasions when Europe tried to use its own ground forces to control the region, only to be swept aside by US bombers and diplomatic intrigues. The Dayton Accord itself was a humiliation for the European powers in what they consider to be their own back yard. One of the first acts of the Blair Labour government was to initiate a defence review to enable British power to be projected independently of the US.

The present attack on Serbia is certainly an American-led war; it is also a further assertion of the resurgent militarism of the ruling elite throughout Europe. For the first time in history, German, British, Italian and French bombers, directed by social-democratic governments, are collectively pouring tonnes of high explosive, not on each other's civilian populations, but on that of another country.

The air war against Serbia follows an Anglo-French

military pact, agreed late last year, the formation of close political ties between the Blair and Schröder governments, and the French decision to integrate its considerable armed forces more closely into NATO. Although Britain in particular uses American influence to fight its corner within Europe, these moves express Europe's growing economic integration, and also mirror the continent-wide rationalisation of the multibillion European defence industry, at present the only serious global challenger to the US.

As recently as last Saturday, the *Scotsman* opined, "Back in 1991, when the old Yugoslavia began to implode, European leaders insisted that this was an opportunity for the EU [European Union] to take command of its own destiny. At that time Jacques Poos, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, declared 'This is the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans.' Only a few years later, contemplating the squalid misery in Croatia and Bosnia, a former foreign minister of neighbouring Belgium summed up the extent of European failure in the Balkans, 'Europe,' he said 'is an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military worm.'"

"The war now taking place presents a late opportunity for the European powers to build just a little credibility. It must not be squandered."

The *Scotsman* went on to note the likely failure of the bombing raids, demanded the use of ground troops and, regardless of the consequences, called for NATO to continue the war. European, and particularly British, experience in the last years has been that once the US bombers have retired, the Balkan occupation armies can fly a UN flag and be composed of largely British and French troops.

This was probably the hope of the European powers when they agreed to US calls for air strikes. Sharing Washington's opinion that the Milosevic government would quickly accede to the Rambouillet terms for Kosovar autonomy once NATO's superior air power

had been demonstrated, they no doubt thought that European interests in the region could then easily be safeguarded by the insertion of their own battalions, trained and bloodied in Belfast and Bosnia.

But only a week later NATO's military strategy did not produce the rapid cave-in they had predicted. With the apparent rout of the KLA proxy army, and a growing American insistence on a ground invasion of massive dimensions, the European powers are again faced with the consequences of their own weakness and division.

The opening air strikes of March 24 illuminate the military imbalance. According to Jane's Defence Information web site, US aircraft participating in the first attacks of the war included two squadrons of F-16s, four squadrons of F-15s, 12 F-117s Stealth fighters, 10 EA6 Prowlers, one squadron of A-10s, two B2 stealth bombers and numerous tanker and early warning aircraft. Subsequent reinforcements have included another 13 F-117s, and a squadron of B-1 bombers.

By contrast, the best-armed Europeans, the British and the French, contributed 8 (now 16) Harriers, and around 40 attack aircraft respectively, as well as other support aircraft. Germany has sent 14 Tornados, while the Italians have deployed around 40 aircraft.

Joe Rogaly in the April 3 *Financial Times* cynically noted, "Let us say something Franco-German is cobbled together. Assume Britain and Italy join in, followed by most of the rest of the EU. The result would be unwieldy, and not powerful enough. It could not replicate the Stealth fighters, the bombing capacity of flotillas of B52s, the mass firings of Cruise missiles that we have seen over the past 10 days. Europe does not possess sufficient will power to accumulate the funds and know-how needed to match US military capability."

Discussion on the character of a full-scale invasion of Kosovo has further exposed European military impotence. The media has generally settled on a figure of 150,000 to 200,000 troops as the required size for an effective assault on a Kosovo defended by the Serbian army. All commentators agree that Europe simply does not have the capacity to transport and support that number of troops, let alone sustain losses estimated by one analyst to be at a rate of one NATO death for every ten Serb fighters.

Only the US has the number of troops--there remain 100,000 US troops in Europe alone--with the capacity to fight and move into action. By contrast, British generals are already complaining that the army is over-stretched and that the present level of overseas engagement cannot be sustained.

For the European bourgeoisie, the reckless military strategy being pursued against Serbia carries immense dangers. If they stand back from the US-NATO assault being carried out in the Balkans, they risk being excluded from the new global carve-up being orchestrated by Washington. If they stand with the US, they risk being embroiled in a war that can rapidly spiral out of control and enflame the whole region. In either case, the exposure of European weakness must give rise to new calls for increased military spending in London, Berlin and Paris, to provide a credible force that can, in the final analysis, challenge the military hegemony of the United States.



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