

Strategic crisis for British imperialism

What's behind Blair's calls for ground war in the Balkans?

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British Prime Minister Tony Blair's ongoing Balkan tour has been an occasion for increasingly strident demands for NATO and the US to consider launching a ground war against Serbia. He has shamelessly appealed to the bellicose sentiments expressed by sections of official Washington, in both the Democratic and Republican parties, in order to place maximum pressure on the Clinton administration, which is fearful of political reaction amongst the American people to the casualties such a war would inevitably entail.

Blair draws strength from such incidents as *Newsweek*'s publication of a letter to US Defense Secretary William Cohen from the Joint Chiefs of Staff supporting ground war, the television interview with retired General Colin Powell calling for the US to "go all out", and other expressions of war-readiness within the Pentagon and the American armed forces.

The constant denials of any differences between Britain and the US over military strategy in Kosovo have, in the process, become evermore threadbare. Britain's Foreign Secretary Robin Cook tried to elaborate a compromise formula. He said that ground troops would be used, but only after the NATO air bombardment had debilitated Serbian defences so this could be done with relative safety. He claimed that NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana was in the process of determining a date when this could be effected and would advise on how long the Yugoslav army could continue resistance.

This was rejected by the Clinton administration. When asked whether the US would approve a "peacemaking" thrust into Kosovo when Serb forces were sufficiently eroded, as suggested by Britain, US Defense Department spokesman Kenneth Bacon replied, "Our opinion is that we are prepared to participate in an international *peacekeeping* force with NATO at its core" (emphasis added).

Blair's posturing is increasingly frenzied—his "whatever it takes" rhetoric—because he has pinned his entire foreign policy strategy on the so-called "special relationship" he enjoys with Clinton. He has tied his own political future to a successful conclusion to the war against Serbia.

Blair faces severe criticism over his handling of the war. Last week, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats united behind

calls for a ground war to be launched within the next fortnight. This has left Blair in the invidious position of trying to placate his domestic opponents by portraying himself as the staunch advocate of all-out war, without seeming to criticise the hesitancy of his main international political ally. For this reason, a candid comment by an unnamed British minister to the *Guardian* newspaper said more than all of Blair's repeated denials about the state of relations between the two governments: "We've tried to give some leadership but in the end we depend on the Americans," he complained.

More is at stake here than Blair's personal fate. The *leitmotif* of British foreign policy throughout the post-war period has been to act as America's closest ally in Europe, as a means of strengthening Britain's hand against Germany and France. This policy has now come unstuck in the skies over Serbia.

A measure of this can be gleaned from the recent media discussion on the need to develop a more aggressive European response in the Balkans. This has brought together the pro-Blair *Guardian* and *Independent* with the Conservative *Daily Telegraph*.

The *Guardian*'s May 18 editorial states, "President Clinton's refusal to commit the United States to preparations for a ground war has had a disorienting effect on the alliance.... In retrospect, the mistake may have been to overestimate the importance of the special relationship.... It is the Americans who must be persuaded, in the first instance by a display of European unity and by a readiness on the part of Europeans to contribute the absolute maximum to a ground force organised for offensive action if necessary."

The *Independent* ran an article by Air Marshal Sir Timothy Garden, who writes, "The [next] two months could be spent in continuing efforts to persuade the United States to change its mind, or, more productively, in getting on with forming an ad hoc coalition from European nations and any others that wanted to contribute.... If we fail, and Kosovo ends in inadequate diplomatic fudge that leaves Milosevic the winner, then neither NATO nor a European security and defence identity has any future. The transatlantic relationship will be in jeopardy and isolationism on both sides of the Atlantic will be the way of

nations."

The *Daily Telegraph* is equally apocalyptic about the dangers to the Atlantic Alliance, warning in its editorial of the same day, "What began as a bloody little Balkan war now threatens to destroy NATO's credibility.... Only total victory can rescue the West's reputation ... it is time to ask whether America's hesitancy is, of itself, an insuperable obstacle to sending ground troops. Or, to put it another way, could the European allies muster among themselves a sufficient force to drive Milosevic back?"

Speculation on the possibility of a co-ordinated European response around the ground war option raises more questions than it answers. The desire of Blair and the British ruling class to drag the US ever deeper into a military quagmire in Kosovo is not shared by Europe's other major powers. Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister, has said that Germany would not back moves to send NATO ground troops into Kosovo without the consent of Belgrade. "This is opposed by all parties," he said. "The time is for a political solution."

Hubert Vedrine, the French foreign minister, also distanced himself from the call for a ground invasion, while senior French sources made clear that the British line was "very dangerous" and divisive.

In Italy, Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema has proposed that NATO offer to halt the bombing in Yugoslavia if Moscow and Beijing agree to turn the G8 plan for a settlement in Kosovo into a UN Security Council resolution. Walter Veltroni, the secretary of the ex-Stalinist Left Democrats—the biggest party in the coalition government—has joined the Greens, Communist Refoundation and the Christian Democrats in calling for a truce.

For its part, Greece has called for a temporary halt to the bombing to aid the search for a diplomatic solution. Many European countries, moreover, face a more substantial and growing public opposition to the war than Blair.

Calls for a European lead to encourage a stiffer line on the part of the US ignore one central political fact: the conclusion drawn from the Balkan events by the major European powers is that their relative military weakness has facilitated continued US dominance over world politics and interference in European affairs. Their intention is to resolve this difficulty, not perpetuate the Continent's reliance on its transatlantic competitor.

For several years, Britain has opposed repeated calls for the creation of military structures in Europe independent of a US-dominated NATO. Blair insists that European military capabilities, organised through the Western European Union (WEU), should be strengthened, but must remain under the NATO umbrella. However, demands for greater independence are growing.

The first serious expression of this came when Romano Prodi, the next president of the European Commission, said recently that the creation of a "European army" was "a logical next

step.... The alternative [is] you will be marginalised in the new world history." Blair reacted angrily; a Downing Street spokesman insisted, "NATO remains the cornerstone of our defence capability. A European army is not something we are in favour of."

Of greater concern for Britain is the stance of its major European rival, Germany. Last weekend at the WEU's annual meeting, the German Defence Minister and current President of the WEU, Rudolf Scharping, said Europe needed to plug gaps in its forces, build up strategic air transport, intelligence gathering and command of joint operations, and co-ordinate arms manufacture. He made clear that this meant independence from NATO. The WEU, he said, would not necessarily disappear before the year 2000, but could act as a "bridge" for those NATO states wanting to join the European Union (EU) and for the "states of the EU which do not belong to NATO but would like to collaborate with it".

This explicit challenge to the US and NATO was not agreed at the WEU meeting. The talks only confirmed that Europe should have a bigger role in ensuring its own security and in dealing with crises like Bosnia or Kosovo. But Scharping's proposal indicates the speed at which a build-up of European, and especially German militarism is being contemplated.

Present military spending in Europe would need to be doubled in order to match that of the US, and a huge increase in the size of Europe's armed forces implemented. Under these circumstances, a negotiated settlement with Milosevic and a bloody nose for NATO, so feared by Blair, is not as unattractive for the other European powers. It could provide both the time and the necessary rationale for the development of an independent military capability.

Such a course would have to be paralleled by strenuous efforts to ensure that the Balkan states came within the economic and political orbit of Europe, rather than the US. This week, the EU took the first step towards launching a "Balkan Stabilisation Pact" to regenerate the region after the Kosovo war and draw all of south-east Europe—including Serbia—into its orbit.

Initial plans are minimal, consisting of an aid package of 100 million euros (US\$107 million) to Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro, but the longer term plan is to establish an open trade area with close links to the EU, built around country-by-country agreements across south-east Europe.

Under these conditions, the precarious balancing act between the United States and Europe, performed by Britain for the past half century, is collapsing under the weight of its own internal contradictions.



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