Chinese embassy bombing escalates political tensions in Britain

Conservatives tell Blair to mount ground war or prepare for defeat

Chris Marsden
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The aftershock from NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade has split cross-party unity in Britain for the air war against Serbia. The Conservative Party, sensing a disaster in the making, have launched a campaign to make sure that everyone knows that this is "Blair's war" and that any blame for failure must be laid to rest at his door. They have coupled this with demands for ground war as the only realistic option for success.

Shadow Foreign Secretary Michael Howard first launched an attack on the government in Parliament, calling the bombing of the Chinese embassy an example of "gross incompetence". The following day he upped the ante by writing an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, in which he noted that the air war had worsened a "humanitarian disaster" and that there were "diplomatic failures leading up to the crisis."

"Two things have been lacking," he added, "clarity in NATO's objectives, and a consistency in the means employed to carry them out. The impression is given that the action is being made up as we go along, and has not been properly thought through." Pointing to Blair's contradictory statements regarding the use of ground troops, he asked, "We want to know whether such a decision has been taken—and, if not, if and when it will be."

Howard concluded by calling for the convening of an inquiry into the conduct of the war after it ended. His line was echoed by Sir Malcolm Rifkind, former Secretary of State for Defence, who said, "I am still puzzled why Mr. Blair did not take the advice of our military. I was at the Ministry of Defence during the Bosnia conflict where the limits of air power were impressed on me. I cannot imagine that the assessment would be any different now."

Heavyweights within the civil service and the military were quoted in sympathy with these views. Sir John Weston, former British Ambassador to both NATO and the UN, said, "The continued credibility of both is an overriding long-term Western interest, and requires a surer touch by political leaders. Meanwhile, persevere; and be ready to put forces on the ground in Kosovo."

Former Chief of Defence Staff Lord Craig asked, "Are we now after military victory? Will we use ground forces? What are our military objectives? Where is the consistency in all of this?"

The reaction in the Conservative Press has been even more forthright. In an article in the *Telegraph* entitled "It's time for Plan B—always assuming NATO has got one", columnist Boris Johnson wrote, "With the distinguished exception of Sion Simon, I can't think of a single general, armchair supremo, or indeed anyone, who thinks this war is anything but a complete and utter shambles.... The point is that Milosevic has at no point been confronted by the kind of offensive that might have made sense of the war."

The *Times* said of the embassy bombing, "A single crass mistake has compounded the already growing public unease that the conduct of this war is fundamentally unserious.... Both politically and militarily, time is running out if disaster is to be avoided. The war of public opinion is being lost."

Calling for a ground war, its editorial continued, "War on the cheap is an oxymoron. The Kosovans have already suffered disastrously from this half-war. For NATO, for European peace and for Britain, the true, high reckoning beckons: it is called failure."

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Blair has become increasingly desperate regarding the mounting opposition to the war against Serbia and the crisis faced by his government. This week he even made a scathing attack on the media for its supposed underplaying of the plight of Kosovar Albanians—the central justification for the NATO offensive. He berated the assembled journalists with the remark, "Once you've reported one mass rape, the next one's not so newsworthy. Seen one mass grave, you've seen the lot."

The government response to Howard's statements was to accuse the Tories of “undermining the morale” of the British forces. Blair's main spokesman, Alistair Campbell, said, “Michael Howard won't cut much ice with the government or the British people, who acknowledge that in conflict situation things can get tough from time to time and people have to show some determination and resolve, not flake off at the first sign of trouble.”

The situation is an explosive one. Faced with the failure of their air-war strategy, growing antagonisms with Russia and China, and a vociferous campaign by the Conservative right, the Labour government is being pushed into a no-win situation. Blair has linked his future firmly to that of Clinton in the US. Only the US can decide whether a ground war will be called. If it is not, then Blair will be savaged by the Tories and the media for his Balkan escapade. If it is, then he will meet far more dangerous opposition from the mass of working people in Britain who—as the right wing point out—are increasingly troubled over the implications of NATO's aggression in Yugoslavia.

Blair's subservience to America has been one of the central concerns of the Tory right since the start of hostilities against Serbia. His foreign policy strategy—such as it exists—is to utilise Britain's economic, political and military relationship with the US in order to counter German and French domination of the European Union. For this reason, he reacted angrily to the call by EU Commission President Romano Prodi to create a European Army. Blair insisted that the US-dominated NATO remain the chief military organisation uniting the European powers. Failure in the Balkans would, therefore, have far wider implications. The *Times* earlier warned of the possible repercussions for Britain's standing within Europe. "No nation," they wrote, "would be more adversely affected by such developments than Britain. The cultural, economic and political link with the United States is more important to these islands than to any other European ally. NATO has rightly been the central element of post war British foreign policy. Mr. Clinton, who has survived so much, might be able to endure the criticism that a false peace would inevitably engender. Tony Blair and his successors would not be so fortunate."

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