

NATO-Russian standoff in Kosovo contains seeds of future wars

Barry Grey
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The first days of the NATO occupation of Kosovo have already belied the claims that the Alliance's victory over Yugoslavia ushers in a period of peace and stability in the region.

Within 24 hours of their entry, NATO troops engaged in deadly fire fights with Serb police and gunmen, two German reporters were shot dead by snipers, retreating Serb forces burned down Albanian homes, and Kosovo Liberation Army guerrillas launched their own terror campaign, killing and abducting Serbs, civilians as well as soldiers and police.

That the crisis which preceded the NATO bombardment was the product of a civil war—and not the genocidal predilections of one Slobodan Milosevic—was amply demonstrated after the bombing had stopped by the actions of the KLA and the mass exodus of Kosovan Serbs.

The most ominous development is the standoff between NATO forces and Russian troops that occupied the Pristina airport. American officials are, for their own reasons, publicly downplaying the significance of the confrontation, but it is impossible to deny that, whatever its immediate outcome, this event points dramatically to an exacerbation of tensions between the major powers as a result of the war.

Washington is deeply concerned over the preemptive deployment of Russian forces into Kosovo—even though the small number of troops makes it a largely symbolic action—and Moscow's refusal thus far to subordinate its forces to the NATO command. The US has throughout the war relied on the compliance of Russia, and counts on Russia's continuing assistance in policing Kosovo and holding Serb nationalist forces in check. At the same time, Washington is determined to deny Russia's demand for its own military sector in northern Kosovo, for fear that such a zone would lead

to the de-facto partition of the province.

As of now US officials are maintaining a low-key posture, hoping that diplomacy, i.e., a combination of threats to cut off IMF loans and the proffer of bribes to Russian civilian and military officials, will achieve their goals. But neither the US nor the Europeans can for long allow the Russians to block access to the Pristina airport and roads leading to the north. The present impasse contains the seeds of an explosive conflict, and at a certain point the US could decide to force the issue.

There is a lobby within the US foreign policy establishment that favors such a course. On Monday former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski published a column in the *Wall Street Journal* headlined “NATO Must Stop Russia's Power Play.” Brzezinski declared: “Boris Yeltsin's power play in Pristina, therefore, must not be allowed to stand. There are many nonviolent ways of isolating the Russian troop contingent at the airport and preventing their resupply by air... Failure to apply pressure decisively will mean that Mr. Milosevic and Mr. Yeltsin will have succeeded in de facto partition.”

In the confrontation between Russia and the US over Kosovo what has come to the fore is a conflict of national interests. Russia's movement of troops into Kosovo has the character of a desperate and improvised maneuver, aimed at asserting traditional Russian interests in the Balkans and strengthening Moscow's bargaining position in the division of the spoils of war.

Russia's record in the Kosovo conflict makes laughable any attempt on the part of the Yeltsin regime, or, for that matter, the military leadership, to pose as defenders of the Serbs and opponents of imperialism. Moscow never challenged the formula for destroying Yugoslav sovereignty drawn up by the US at

Rambouillet. Throughout the NATO war, Russia refused to provide significant aid to Belgrade, or even lift the UN sanctions against Yugoslavia. At the behest of Washington, Yeltsin appointed Chernomyrdin as his liaison with Belgrade and NATO and fired his prime minister Primakov, whom the Americans considered insufficiently pliant. In the end, Chernomyrdin endorsed NATO's basic demands and joined with Finnish President Ahtisaari to demand that Milosevic accept them.

This final act of Russian subservience to the US provoked public condemnation from leading military officers. It may be they took it upon themselves to send a troop contingent into Kosovo in defiance of NATO and without the prior knowledge of the civilian leadership in Moscow. This scenario is suggested by the fact that neither Yeltsin's public spokesman, nor his foreign minister Ivanov, nor Chernomyrdin had advance knowledge that the troops under Col. Gen. Zavarzin were headed for Kosovo.

The disarray and divisions within the Russian state reflect an intensifying conflict between two main factions within the political, military and social elite: an outright comprador faction that is prepared to abandon Russia's traditional great power ambitions in return for capital and bribes from the West, and a resurgent nationalist faction animated by Great Russian chauvinism. Yeltsin has sought to maintain his power by tacking between these two factions. With popular anger over Russia's ignominious role in the war on the rise, Yeltsin apparently decided to adapt himself, at least for the present, to the demands of his generals. Indeed, the day after Zavarzin led his troops into Kosovo, Yeltsin announced he was promoting the then-lieutenant general to colonel general.

But the masses of Serbs will not benefit from having Russian, as opposed to American, German or French, occupiers. Nor will the conditions of devastation and foreign oppression be materially altered if, as the Russians insist, Western troops operate under United Nations command, rather than that of NATO.

The Clinton administration, assuming it could push the Russians without limit to act as its cat's-paw in the Balkan conflict, was caught unawares when it discovered that even the Yeltsin regime could go only so far in bowing to American dictates. Having dealt with Yeltsin for many years, however, the Americans

believe they can bring him around. What they overlook, their usual myopia and arrogance compounded by their victory over Yugoslavia, is the growing possibility of a far more nationalistic and aggressive regime replacing the present leadership in Moscow.

The initial stage of the occupation of Kosovo has underscored the extremely reckless character of the policy being pursued by the United States. It will generate ever more explosive conflicts, not only with small and weak countries like Yugoslavia, but also with those capable of mounting a far more substantial response to US aggression. The NATO war has opened the way to new and greater conflagrations in the future.



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