

US forces conflict with KLA-backed Albanian separatists in Macedonia

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US and NATO forces have been involved in open clashes with ethnic Albanian separatist forces in Kosovo and the neighbouring Republic of Macedonia over the past few days. On Thursday March 8, 300 US troops crossed the border from Kosovo into Macedonia to secure the village of Tanusevci, seized the previous month by a group calling itself the National Liberation Army, which has the same initials in Albanian as the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK).

The action came after weeks of conflict with Albanian separatist forces linked to the KLA throughout the Presevo Valley. The area makes up much of the 5km/3m demilitarised “ground safety” zone set up by NATO after its 78-day bombing campaign against the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic in June 1999. Since then KLA fighters have used the protection offered by NATO to mount incursions into territory in southern Serbia while posing as the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, and now into northern Macedonia under the badge of the UCK.

Heavy fighting is continuing in northern Macedonia after the US action. Ethnic Albanian forces near the villages of Brest and Malino attacked a 30-strong convoy of government officials and aid workers, including a senior general and the deputy interior minister, as it headed for talks with local Albanian leaders. At least one Macedonian policeman and an Albanian guerrilla died in fighting with security forces.

Direct conflict between US military and Albanian separatists first began Wednesday, when American soldiers in Kosovo traded fire with guerrillas across the border from Tanusevci. An estimated 150 to 300 guerrillas were stationed in the village, but it was abandoned prior to the subsequent arrival of US troops.

The Macedonian capital Skopje is located just 20 miles south of Tanusevci, and the tiny state of two million people has a predominantly Slavic population, but is at least 25 percent Albanian. Macedonia is calling on NATO to create a buffer zone on its border with Kosovo.

The justification advanced for NATO's war against Serbia

was the claim that Milosevic's regime was carrying out policies of “ethnic cleansing” against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The KLA, previously considered by the CIA as a criminal gang of drug runners and terrorists, became a key ally of the US at that time in facilitating and preparing a campaign to depose Milosevic and establish American hegemony over the Balkans.

US efforts to remove Milosevic concluded successfully when he was deposed last October and the more pliant and pro-Western, but equally nationalist regime of Vojislav Kostunica was installed.

A policy shift is now underway, in which the US and Europe are considering allowing Serbia to resume—albeit in a more limited fashion—a role in policing Balkan stability, this time they hope more firmly under their control.

Already on February 25, US Secretary of State Colin Powell and his opposite numbers in NATO agreed to begin a phased reduction in the buffer zone around Kosovo. On Thursday, NATO headquarters in Brussels allowed Yugoslav troops back into part of the buffer zone dividing Kosovo from Serbia for the first time since its creation. This gives Yugoslav forces an official role in helping keep ethnic Albanian rebels out of Macedonia, as the Kostunica government has been demanding, and signals a broader realignment on Balkan questions.

The shift in Western policy is not simply due to a belief that Kostunica can be trusted, however. Just as significant is the growing belief amongst the European powers and the Balkan states that America's erstwhile ally, the KLA, poses the greatest single threat to regional stability—due to its striving for a “Greater Albania,” or at least a “Greater Kosovo”, as well as its nakedly criminal activities.

As a result of the KLA's actions over the past months, Macedonia, for example, faces the prospect of ethnic conflict being ignited with its Albanian minority. Should this develop, there is every likelihood it would draw in Macedonia's eastern neighbour, Bulgaria and even Greece to the south.

Reports earlier this week stated that Bulgarian President

Petar Stoyanov had told his Macedonian counterpart, Boris Traikovski, that he was ready to send in "Bulgarian armed forces if Macedonia asks its neighbours or international organisations". Bulgarian Defence Minister Boiko Noev was forced to issue a retraction the next day, stating that "Stoyanov declared moral and political support for the Macedonian government but this should not be interpreted as an official proposal for sending troops to Macedonia."

A Greek foreign ministry spokesman blamed the spread of ethnic Albanian unrest on the "selective implementation" of UN-mandated pledges to disarm separatists—an implicit attack on the US, which is responsible for policing the demilitarised zone and enjoys a commanding influence over NATO's K-for troops in Kosovo.

The US also faces growing criticism from Russia concerning the disastrous implications of its embrace of the KLA and the destabilisation of Moscow's long-time Serbian ally. President Vladimir Putin called Kosovo a hotbed of terrorism and said ethnic Albanian separatists were exploiting a power vacuum that NATO and the US were responsible for creating. "We warned that this would happen," he said, adding, "The potential for extremism spilling beyond Kosovo is building."

France has utilised these growing difficulties to argue that the Macedonian conflict be utilized as the pretext for what would be the first action by Europe's long-planned rapid reaction force. It suggested that European Union rather than K-for troops should protect unarmed EU observers in the Presevo valley. France—repeatedly accused of holding pro-Serbian positions by US politicians and military leaders—has also been pushing hard for the speedy abolition of the "ground safety" zone along the Kosovo border.

The machinations of the Western powers have already provoked two bloody conflicts between rival gangs of right wing ethnic politicians in the past decade—firstly in Bosnia and then Kosovo. There is a real and growing danger that war will now unfold in Macedonia—this time with Serbia as the West's ally rather than a convenient bogeyman.

That Macedonia re-emerges at the centre of Balkan affairs is itself the greatest indictment of the criminal policy pursued by the US and Europe of encouraging ethnically-based separatist movements in order to break up Yugoslavia and ensure their own domination of the Balkans.

Although Macedonia did not play a significant role in more recent Bosnian and Kosovan events, historically conflicts over this territory played a major part in two Balkan Wars and the First World War.

During the first Balkan war of 1912, an alliance of Balkan states—Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro—fought against the ruling Ottoman (Turkish) Empire. The Macedonian and Albanian territories were overrun, but the

imperialist powers intervened and enforced the Treaty of London in May 1913, under which Macedonia was given over to Bulgarian control, while Albania was declared an independent state.

Serbia and Greece demanded Macedonian territory of their own and a second war began, which resulted in a defeat for Bulgaria and the division of Macedonia between Greece and Serbia. The imperialists designated Albania as a protectorate to be ruled by the great powers, led by Britain, but with borders excluding areas such as Kosovo with large Albanian populations. This policy of divide and rule—which historically came to be designated as "Balkanisation"—ensured the control by one or other of the Great Powers over the strategically vital region up until the end of the Second World War and the victory of Tito's partisans. It has been reapplied with a vengeance over the past decade or more since the fall of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe.

The conflict now developing in southern Serbia and the Republic of Macedonia (formed on the territory that initially fell under Serbian control in 1913) shows that the interference of the Western powers in Balkan affairs is as dangerous today as at the beginning of the last century. There is every possibility that what may begin with efforts to mop up troublesome Albanian separatists could spiral into broader conflicts.

All the participants in the last century's bloody Balkan quarrels are becoming involved once again. Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece have pledged themselves as allies of Macedonia against ethnic Albanian provocations, but none should be taken at their word. It was only in 1995, for example, that an accord was signed between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia after years of bitter recriminations and an embargo imposed on Skopje by Athens. Justifying its unilateral embargo, the Greek government said that Macedonia's choice of name following its split from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991 implied a territorial claim on Greece's own northern province of the same name. Greece claims the province as the ancient kingdom of Alexander the Great, but it was actually acquired only in 1913, as a result of the second Balkan war and the subsequent forcible expulsion of the land's Bulgarian-speaking peoples.



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