

US-European antagonisms sharpen over Macedonia

Richard Tyler, Chris Marsden
22 August 2001

NATO chiefs will decide today whether to press ahead with “Operation Essential Harvest” in Macedonia. Their decision follows the visit by NATO Supreme Commander US General Joseph Ralston to determine whether, despite sporadic violence and the bombing of a monastery, the cease-fire agreed last Monday will hold. The mission will eventually involve the deployment of a 3,500-strong NATO force tasked with overseeing a weapons handover by the Albanian insurgent National Liberation Army (NLA) that has been fighting Macedonian government forces since March.

British and French units began arriving in Macedonia last weekend as an advance guard, following the accord reached in Skopje agreeing a “complete cessation of hostilities” and outlining constitutional changes that grant greater rights to Macedonia’s Albanian minority. Representatives of the country’s main Macedonian and Albanian parties signed the “Framework Agreement,” which also provides the basis for the NATO operation.

Neither the document, prepared under the joint auspices of the European Union and the USA, nor the deployment of NATO forces can bring peace to this former Yugoslav republic. Indeed an examination of the circumstances leading up to the signing of the agreement shows that the destabilisation of Macedonia is the product of the growing conflict between the Western powers for hegemony over the strategically vital Balkan region.

Just months ago, NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson was denouncing the NLA as “a bunch of murderous thugs whose objective is to destroy a democratic Macedonia”. EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana said the NLA “terrorists have to be isolated,” while US Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed, “the United States’ total commitment to the territorial integrity of Macedonia” in the face of “dastardly and cowardly acts from terrorists and terrorist organizations that are trying to subvert the democratic process in Macedonia.”

Recalling such statements highlights the hypocrisy of any claim by the Western powers to be acting as the “honest brokers” in Macedonia. The central aim of the Framework Agreement is to push the government in Skopje to reach a settlement with the very organisation the NATO allies earlier denounced as terrorists who should be met by force.

The agreement allows for a wide-ranging “decentralisation” of the state. The promise of greater ethnic Albanian representation in the security forces means former NLA guerrillas, rather than being treated as a bunch of thugs, will soon be donning police uniforms.

The elevation of the NLA, making it into a power in the land, has its origins in the efforts of the US to bring down the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. As the dominant power in the region, Serbia was viewed by Washington as an obstacle to its control of the Balkans.

As part of its war against Serbia, the US financed, trained and armed the ethnic Albanian separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA, or UÇK in Albanian), which waged a terrorist campaign in the Serbian province and provoked retaliatory actions by Milosevic’s nationalist regime. Under the

guise of defending Kosovo’s Albanian minority from ethnic cleansing, NATO then launched its cowardly war against Serbia in March 1999. After three months of high-altitude bombing raids on Belgrade and other Serbian cities, the Western-imposed “peace” saw the creation of a de-facto NATO protectorate in Kosovo.

As well as securing control of Yugoslavia’s own natural resources—such as the substantial deposits of lead, zinc, cadmium, silver, gold and coal in Kosovo—whoever dominates the Balkans controls access to the former territories of the Soviet Union. The greatest untapped oil and gas reserves in the world are located in the former Soviet republics bordering the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan). Reserves comparable in size to Iran or Iraq’s are the subject of intense competition over who will control extraction. Western analysts also expect the Caspian region to become a major world gold producer. Kazakhstan, with 10,000 tons, has the second largest gold reserves in the world.

In February 1998 during a US House Committee meeting on the strategic importance of the Caspian region, chairman Doug Bereuter explained, “US policy goals regarding energy resources in this region include fostering the independence of the states and their ties to the West; breaking Russia’s monopoly over oil and gas transport routes; promoting Western energy security through diversified suppliers; encouraging the construction of east-west pipelines that do not transit Iran; and denying Iran dangerous leverage over the Central Asian economies.”

Following the war against Serbia, under US patronage, the former KLA guerrillas became the bedrock of the “Kosovo Protection Corps” and were equipped with modern weapons. This provided the basis for continued operations to destabilise the Milosevic regime in Serbia. First, the KLA spawned the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac, (UCPMB), which was responsible mounting attacks on Serbian police units in the Presevo valley, a largely Albanian area inside Serbia proper.

Then, under the eyes of the American NATO troops in Kosovo, in the guise of the NLA, the KLA began to funnel arms and men across what has been described as a “porous” border into Macedonia, to prosecute a struggle against the government.

Some commentators have argued that the actions of the UCPMB and NLA are those of a breakaway ultra-nationalist faction of the KLA, seeking to pressurise the US and the Western powers to intervene on their behalf once more, in order to take forward their campaign for a Greater Albania. Others, however, allege there is far more direct US support in a campaign to destabilise Macedonia and bring it under American rather than European influence.

Europe has made strenuous efforts to bring the Balkans into its economic and political orbit. In April this year, Macedonia signed up to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which provides for trade liberalisation, political co-operation, economic and institutional reforms as a step towards membership of the European Union and adoption of the euro. Albania and Bulgaria plan to take the same route. Should Europe’s domination of these countries be consolidated, this could possibly threaten

vital US interests in the Caucasus and Caspian.

One of the key supply routes in the region linking the Black Sea and the Adriatic coast runs through Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania. A recent article by Professor Michael Chossudovsky of the University of Ottawa notes, "The Anglo-American consortium which controls the AMBO Trans-Balkan pipeline project linking the Bulgarian port of Burgas to Vlore on the Albanian Adriatic coastline largely excludes the participation of Europe's competing oil giant Total-Fina-Elf." (*America's War in Macedonia*, June 30, 2001)

The AMBO pipeline will eventually link up directly with other pipeline corridors between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea basin.

Chossudovsky argues that the US is sponsoring the activities of the KLA and its Macedonian sister party the NLA, in order to ensure its control of the entire area through increasing the influence of its Albanian proxies. There is a significant body of evidence to support such a hypothesis. Though both the US and Europe took part in drafting the latest proposals for the NATO-policed cease-fire, there have been repeated indications of underlying tensions, including accusations made openly in the European media that the KLA operation in Macedonia is effectively sponsored by America, with British support.

A March 11 article in Britain's *Observer* newspaper cited a European K-For battalion commander saying, "The CIA has been allowed to run riot in Kosovo with a private army designed to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic. Now he's gone the US State Department seems incapable of reining in its bastard army... Most of last year, there was a growing frustration with US support for the radical Albanians. US policy was and still is out of step with the other NATO allies."

On June 25, US forces took unilateral action to evacuate hundreds of Albanian separatist guerrillas from outside the Macedonian capital Skopje. A force of 81 American soldiers and 16 armed Humvee military vehicles escorted 20 busloads of troops belonging to the NLA from the village of Aracinovo on the outskirts of Skopje, after they had been trapped there by the Macedonian army.

Four NATO trucks helped transport the separatists' weapons, which were later returned to the guerrillas in an operation authored by NATO commander, US General Joseph Ralston, and sanctioned by President Bush, his national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

On June 28, the German daily *Hamburger Abendblatt* ran a story on the rescue, which stated, "Among the retreating rebels there were also 17 'instructors'—former US officers, who tutored the rebel in military matters. But this isn't all: Macedonian security circles maintain that 70 per cent of the equipment that was carried away by the Guerrillas was US made—including the most modern type of third generation night-viewers."

At the end of July, the influential German news weekly *Der Spiegel* published an article headlined "The Americans' Double Game," exposing US involvement with the Albanian insurgents in Macedonia. The article stated, "the KLA is the main villain, while the Americans play a shady role."

"The KLA fighters were originally schooled by American and British trainers in Albanian camps for deployment against Milosevic's soldiers in Kosovo. No one knows the most important participants, the KLA command structure, their financiers and weapons' suppliers as well as the CIA, which regards the Albanian Secret service as an affiliate organisation."

With talks aimed at forcing the government in Skopje to reach a settlement with the KLA/NLA in Macedonia in the balance, Washington was forced to act to deflect criticisms of its role. All the more so when a similar story to that in *Der Spiegel* appeared in London's *Sunday Times*.

On August 10, the US Office of Public Affairs in Pristina issued a strongly worded statement expressing concern that the media in Europe were "conveying false reports on US support for the so-called National

Liberation Army [UCK] in Macedonia. Spreading misinformation makes it harder to restore a climate in which Macedonia's parties can implement the agreement initialled on 8 August.

"In particular, we are concerned about patently false information reported in the London *Sunday Times* and *Der Spiegel* that has been repeated in local media without verification or substantiation. Irresponsible and inflammatory reports undermine the genuine efforts of the international community to support a peaceful solution."

Although Britain will provide 1,000 troops, France, Germany and Italy are also planning to send significant numbers. They clearly wish to ensure that the US is not in a position to dictate events as they did in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Underlining the barely concealed tensions across the Atlantic, Britain's Conservative opposition has questioned whether the operation should proceed. Strong advocates of an Anglo-American axis, the Tories believe the US is at best lukewarm about what is an essentially European initiative in Macedonia. Shadow Defence Secretary Iain Duncan Smith expressed his misgivings over "British troops being sent to a very volatile situation", while the party's press release asserted its belief "that the United States had misgivings about the initial deployment."

In the final analysis, the manoeuvres and counter-manoevres of the Western powers in the Balkans are creating a situation that can easily spiral out of control. Whatever the degree to which the actions of the Albanian nationalists in Macedonia have been sanctioned by the US, the whipping up of national antagonisms has its own terrible logic. The separatists will rightly regard the Framework Agreement as a concession wrung with Western support, and as a step towards achieving a Greater Albania.

Fighting has continued unabated since the agreement was signed. Although the main rebel force gave its approval to the Framework Agreement, a split-off group calling itself the Albanian National Army has rejected the deal. In their communiqué, the organisation said it would continue its efforts "until we achieve the full liberation of Albanian lands". The NLA's guerrilla war has deepened antagonisms between the majority Slav Macedonian population and the sizeable ethnic Albanian minority. Macedonian chauvinists are already seeking to whip-up these antagonisms in order to legitimise reprisals against the Albanian minority.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact