

Tensions deepen as NATO begins Macedonia mission

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NATO troops have begun arriving in the Macedonian capital Skopje in significant numbers, despite almost universal scepticism in the viability of their stated mission.

Within the NATO powers there is significant opposition to a mission many believe will become an open-ended military occupation, rather than one limited to a month and confined to the task of gathering weapons from the Albanian separatist National Liberation Army (NLA).

Britain was forced to almost double the number of troops it had planned to take part in "Operation Essential Harvest" because other NATO countries failed to offer the required specialist units for the potentially dangerous mission. The UK will provide 2,000 of the 3,500-strong force. A defence source said an appeal had been put out by NATO headquarters to all member-states, "but no one came forward".

The German cabinet, lead by Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democratic Party (SPD), pushed through its endorsement of plans to send 500 troops on Wednesday, but it faces opposition in parliament, headed by a dissident group of SPD deputies. Dieter Maass, one of the Social Democrats opposed to German participation in the Macedonian mission, said: "I just see the danger of a trap of violence lurking. What if we intervene and the fighting escalates again?"

Even if the NLA formally adheres to the ceasefire, there is little or no chance of the NATO mission succeeding on its stated terms. The NLA is expected to surrender somewhere between two and four thousand arms, but this is only a fraction of their arsenal. The Macedonian government insists the number of NLA weapons is closer to 85,000, but even if this is an inflated figure, it remains the case that in the past two months NATO soldiers have seized more than 600

rifles, 49,000 small arms rounds, 1,000 anti-tank weapons, 650 mortar rounds and 1,400 grenades and mines, as well as nearly 500 people and 24 horses and mules on the Kosovo border. On top of this, the NLA possesses at least three Russian T35 tanks and an estimated 600,000 weapons are still available for sale on the black market in Albania. In the past days, the NLA has been frantically sending weapons back across the border into Kosovo for later use.

On top of this, an ostensible breakaway, the Albanian National Army (ANA), has been formed that has rejected the cease-fire. It has already claimed responsibility for killing 10 policemen on the day the agreement was first signed last week. One Western diplomat was cited alleging that the ANA is merely a pseudonym for the continued actions of the NLA proper. "If anybody has cooked this up it's the NLA," he said. "Whether they've engineered it or not, and I suspect they have, the NLA come out winners."

Most Macedonians believe that the NATO powers, and the US and Britain in particular, are intervening only in order to strengthen the hand of their Albanian puppets, the NLA and its parent body the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). They regard Operation Essential Harvest as a deliberate attempt to destabilise Macedonia and so establish a permanent NATO military presence. US Defense Secretary Rumsfeld stressed to the media: "NATO has not been invited in to take over the country. They have a government. They have a structure. They have not asked NATO to come in and occupy it." But precisely such a takeover is being openly advocated by leading military figures, top policy forums such as the International Crisis Group and in sections of the Western media.

Wesley Clark, NATO Supreme Commander during the Kosovo campaign, wrote in the *New York Times*

this week advocating the establishment of a permanent Western military presence. “If NATO is serious about making democracy work in this fractious corner of Europe, then Western forces need to enter as soon as possible, engage as broadly as possible and stay as long as necessary.”

Once again it is the nominally liberal press that is siding most fervently with the advocates of military intervention. Britain’s *Independent* newspaper has also called for troops to go in, “in a phrase Tony Blair used of Kosovo, ‘for as long as it takes’.” Hailing the present operation as a “good example of the need for a European defence force within NATO”, the newspaper concluded, “Pausing only to observe the paradox that it is now liberals rather than conservatives who argue for higher defence spending, this operation should act as a further spur to increased European spending power through more efficient pooling of resources.”

The Macedonian government’s response to the Western intervention has been to step up its efforts to form a strategic alliance with Russia. Macedonia has been building up its own arms supplies through deals with Russia and the Ukraine.

The Ukrainian government was criticised by the Western powers for supplying helicopter gunships to Macedonia, who said they would consider suspending their arms sales. However, substantial arms shipments aboard Ukrainian Antonov supply planes are said by Western defence sources to still be coming in through Petrovac airport in Macedonia.

On Thursday, Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski met with Russia’s President Vladimir Putin in the Ukraine. Putin expressed his own “great doubts” about the NATO mission and called instead for measures to stop terrorist attacks. Trajkovski emphasised Russia’s role in helping Macedonia solve the crisis: “Our assessments coincide. Both President Putin and I think that the source of problems in the region is Kosovo which continues to be a region’s bleeding spot.”

In the immediate aftermath of NATO’s bombardment of Serbia and takeover of Kosovo in 1999, tensions between the Western powers and Russia took on explosive forms. A standoff developed between NATO forces and Russian troops that had occupied Pristina airport. Russia deployed its forces pre-emptively to demonstrate its independence from the US and Western powers, and to defend its own strategic interests in the

Balkans. Moscow sought to strengthen its hand in any haggling with the West over who should benefit from a new division of the Balkans. Later it was revealed that NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark reportedly had ordered British and French forces to launch a military assault to prevent the Russian troops from taking control of Pristina airport. This was only prevented when Britain’s senior military representative in Kosovo, General Sir Michael Jackson, refused. Jackson told Clarke, “I’m not going to start World War III for you.”

The Russian ruling elite views the growing domination of the Balkans by the US as a threat to its strategic interests in areas such as the oil rich Caspian basin. Since the end of the Kosovo campaign, Russia has launched its own bloody war in Chechnya and taken every opportunity to thwart the growth of Western influence in any of the states that make up the Balkans, the Caspian basin and the Caucasus.



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