



NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

## **STRATEGIC FORUM**

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# **Preventing A Sixth Twentieth-Century Balkan War**

Based on on-site research by the authors, Dr. Hans Binnendijk and Dr. Jeffrey Simon in Albania and Macedonia in September 1994.

## **Conclusions**

- **Although the Southern Balkan situation appears stable, two developments could ignite the sixth Balkan War of the century.**
- **The first is in the political-ethnic situation in Kosovo. Belgrade continues repressive policies against Kosovars and has recently tightened control over humanitarian relief. Consequently, moderate Kosovar leader Rugova is under pressure from radicals within his own party.**
- **The second development is the economic crisis in Macedonia. The effects of the embargo on Serbia and a Greek embargo on Macedonia are catastrophic. Because approximately 25% of Skopje's wage earners have not been paid in the past five months, major labor demonstrations could occur this autumn.**
- **A more aggressive policy of preventive diplomacy with much greater EU participation is needed.**

## **Background**

The Balkans have already suffered five wars in this century. In 1912-13 the Balkan League warred against Ottoman forces, and during the summer of 1913, Serbia, Greece, and Romania fought with Bulgaria over control of Macedonia. World War I erupted after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914. The Second World War also devastated the region, as did the ensuing Greek Civil War. If the conflict in Bosnia spreads south to Macedonia, it could trigger the sixth Balkan war.

The Treaty of Versailles created a multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, composed of Slavs and many other ethnic and religious groups. The Treaty also created an Albanian state that contained only one-half of the ethnic Albanian nation; the other half was scattered among neighboring Yugoslavia (in Kosovo and Macedonia) and Greece. During the inter-war period, World War II, and the Greek Civil War that followed, the region experienced tragic and destabilizing ethnic migrations, and various forms of ethnic purification.

After World War II, Josip Tito established an authoritarian Communist state in Yugoslavia, one that defined itself as non-aligned in its international orientation. In recent years, Yugoslavia followed in the path of other disintegrating multi-ethnic states such as the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.

The triggers for a Balkan War are in Macedonia and Kosovo.

### **Macedonia: Internal Implosion.**

Macedonia, a state of two million people, declared independence from Yugoslavia in September 1991. After the early Balkan Wars and the Bucharest Peace Treaty, Macedonia was divided into three parts, with the current state of Macedonia coming under Serbian rule. During World War II, the Macedonian Republic was proclaimed a constituent republic of Yugoslavia. An independent multi-ethnic state since 1991, Macedonia has roughly 65% Slavic Macedonians and 20 to 35% ethnic Albanian Muslims. The Muslims' demographic growth rate is one of the highest in the world—almost 3.5% per year.

The challenge of nation-building is so daunting that the viability of the Macedonian state is in question. One indication of internal tension lies in the Macedonian claim that Albanians comprise only 22% of the population, while Albanians claim they are 35-40%. At stake is the issue of state legitimacy. Though Albanians hold 21 of the Parliament's 120 seats and five ministerial positions in the moderate Gligorov Government coalition, they are underrepresented in the Army and virtually excluded from local police and government.

This disparity has been accentuated by neighboring Albania's claims that "one million" Albanians live in Macedonia and "two million" Albanians are under Serbian domination in Kosovo. The Albanian Government believes that the Macedonian Constitution and census discriminate against Albanians. It has, until recently, supported a split in the ethnic Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), bringing the nationalist Menduh Taci to the fore. Political activities among Albanians in the states of Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia (Kosovo) have obstructed Macedonian nation-building efforts.

Macedonia's economic difficulties further complicate the equation. Since 70% of Macedonia's trade had been with Yugoslavia, the sanctions against Serbia have closed off Macedonia's northern border and significantly disrupted the economy. Agricultural products cannot find export markets, and industry and construction have been particularly hard hit. With 25% of Skopje's labor force not having received wages for five months, major labor demonstrations could occur, particularly as the October elections approach.

Because of disagreements with Macedonia about its name (the same as the Greek province of Macedonia) and flag (which contains the Thessaloniki Battle Star of Vergina), Greece sealed off Macedonia's southern access through the port of Thessaloniki in February 1994, disrupting Macedonia's traditional North-South lines of communication with disastrous consequences for its economy.

To help maintain stability and a moderate government in Macedonia, Albania has opened the port of Durres to facilitate the flow of goods from the West through Albania to Macedonia and has withdrawn support for the Taci faction. Similarly, commerce from Macedonia to Bulgaria and Turkey in the East has become critical. Since the West-East trade route is Macedonia's life-line, it is essential to improve it to handle the demands of more traffic.

Unrest due to economic difficulties could soon divide along ethnic lines and lead to serious conflict. Unless an international force prevents them, Serbs, Greeks, and others could seize the opportunity to fill the vacuum. Once the process begins, an expanded Balkan War would be difficult to prevent.

### **Kosovo: The External Trigger.**

Just as Macedonia's internal problems could trigger a wider Balkan War, Kosovo's ethnic situation could be an external trigger. Ethnic Albanians comprise approximately two million (90%) of Kosovo's total population.

Under the 1974 Constitution, Kosovo maintained the status of an autonomous region of Yugoslavia. During the early 1980s the Serbs began to restrict the rights of the Kosovar (Albanian) minority in Kosovo. After a wave of unrest in 1989, Serbian President Milosevic unconstitutionally revoked Kosovo's autonomous status, and since 1990, the Serbs have driven Kosovars from their jobs and government offices, and shut down Kosovo's Albanian school system. Thus denied fundamental rights of citizenship, many Kosovars have fled Serbia; those remaining have formed their own "underground government," led by Ibrahim Rugova of the Democratic Alliance of Kosovars (LDK) Party.

Since 1992 Serbs have maintained domination through a military force estimated at 40,000 regular military troops and 30,000 paramilitary and police forces in Kosovo. The result has been a modified system of apartheid, with two societies sharing the same territory in a high state of tension and in virtual isolation from each other.

Milosevic has been cautious due to the US battalion's participation in UNPROFOR and the warnings sent by Presidents Bush and Clinton that civil war in Kosovo could lead to US-Serbian confrontation. Though Milosevic has reined in Vojislav Seselj (Arkan) and other ultra-nationalist paramilitary leaders, he has recently tightened non-governmental organizations' humanitarian assistance to Kosovo. Rugova is facing increasing pressure from Kosovar radicals who see no results from his moderate policies.

Ethnic Albanians in Western Europe have provided economic assistance, and many in Albania and Macedonia have sent arms to their Kosovar brethren. If violence were to break out, many Kosovars would be slaughtered and as many as 400,000 would flee. Massive refugee flows would have drastic consequences on Serbia's neighbors. Though many Kosovars could flee to Albania, the majority are likely to go to Macedonia, where President Kiro Gligorov publicly cannot even discuss plans for refugees because it would destabilize the government. Since refugee planning is totally inadequate and Macedonian resources are non-existent, many refugees could not be contained in Macedonia, so their movement in an effort to find safe access to the West would likely continue south towards Greece. Some would arm and return to fight Serbs in Kosovo.

As a result, the Serbs would likely move into northern Macedonia to destroy renegade Kosovars, and the Greeks would likely enter southern Macedonia to keep Kosovar refugees out of Greece. Since Macedonia has no ability to resist, Bulgaria might intervene to protect Macedonians, whom they consider ethnically close, and Albania might send volunteers and weapons to assist Albanians in Macedonia. As soon as Greece entered Macedonia, Turkey would likely respond by taking action against Greece in Macedonia or in the Aegean Islands. Two NATO allies would again be at war.

### **The Necessity of Coordinated Strategy and Policy.**

Since either Macedonia's implosion or Kosovar refugees could ignite the process, one can prevent a wider Balkan War only by uncocking both Balkan triggers. This requires short-, mid-, and long-term strategy.

*The short- and mid-term goals* -- to keep a moderate government and viable state -- require enough economic support to sustain Macedonia through the winter. This will require immediate US and European Union (EU) economic assistance, and coordination with European allies to urge Greece to lift its dangerous blockade of Macedonia. *The long-term goals* require enough economic assistance to help Macedonia develop an East-West transportation infrastructure. Macedonia needs a road and rail network to relieve its dependence on its South-North axis and to instill subregional cooperation with neighboring Albania and Bulgaria. In return, the West should expect two Macedonian concessions: (1) reformed Constitutional notions of citizenship (to relieve internal ethnic tensions and improve external relations with Albania); and (2) good faith negotiations with Greece on such outstanding issues as flag and name.

For Kosovo, the US should develop a strategy and policies to avoid massive refugee flows into Macedonia, or to control them should Kosovo's conflict intensify. Serbia must understand that it will pay a high price if it drives Kosovars south as refugees. Second, if refugees do eventually arrive in Macedonia, the West must have a contingency plan already in place coordinated not only with subregional actors Macedonia and Albania, but also with Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria and a strategy and well developed policies with the broader North Atlantic Treaty allies.

The most complex challenge is that the overall strategy and the short-, mid-, and long-term policies must be coordinated for *both* Macedonia *and* Kosovo. *If we succeed in only one*, we will have gone only half the distance in trying to prevent a larger Balkan War.

### **The Issues**

#### **(1) US Troops in Macedonia.**

As part of a UN mission, the US has 525 troops in Able Sentry II deployed along the eastern half of the border between Serbia and Macedonia. The Nordic Battalion patrols the western half. The United States has nine permanently deployed outposts on the disputed border. Relations with the UN commanders are generally smooth except for US reluctance to interpose itself between Serb and Macedonian forces in some locations. Evacuation plans seem feasible and are constantly exercised.

US observers indicate that current troop strength and armaments are adequate for the current mission. They do fear mission creep and Americanization of the operation if US force levels are increased. They say the greatest risk to American forces is conflict stemming from activity along the border with Serb forces who are poorly trained.

The US/UN deployments provide: (1) comfort for a strained Macedonian government; (2) a line of demarcation where the border is uncertain; (3) an indication that the United States values an independent Macedonia; and (4) a modest deterrent against Serbian incursions. Current US force levels are adequate for the first three purposes, but perhaps not the fourth. A stronger force with some local reinforcement capability would provide greater deterrence, since it might delay the need to evacuate immediately.

If the US decides to increase force levels, its forces should not exceed 50% of the total UN force, because that would probably result in Americanization of the effort. The US should use its additional deployments to attract new deployments from EU countries. That would engage EU countries more fully and send a clearer message to Greece and Serbia not to send troops into Macedonia.

## **(2) US Diplomatic Relations with Macedonia.**

Skopje values US recognition and seeks full diplomatic relations. The US could continue to use extension of diplomatic relations to soften Skopje's position on the name and flag issues. But the US should not wait too long to extend relations because Skopje desperately needs legitimacy. Meanwhile, the US liaison office is understaffed; given the importance of Macedonia, it should be enlarged.

## **(3) Greek-Macedonian Relations.**

Beyond the flag and name issues, the Greeks are concerned about the influence Skopje might have on Macedonians living in northern Greece. Skopje is unlikely to drop "Macedonia" from its country's name. After the October 16 elections, President Gligorov conceivably could agree to a name change like the "Republic of Macedonia, Skopje" or "Vardar Macedonia." He might also agree to modify the flag, which appears to be a lesser issue. In exchange, Gligorov would need more than a lifting of the embargo, but possibly something less than full diplomatic recognition by Greece. An agreement by Greece not to disrupt commerce and to accept Macedonian passports might be enough. Increased EU pressure on Athens is needed in preparation for post-election negotiations.

## **(4) East-West Road and Rail Links.**

Building road and rail links across Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Turkey would give Skopje an alternative to the North-South trade routes, reduce the impact of the Serb/Greek sanctions, soften Greek positions on some issues, and give Macedonians greater hope for the future. It would cost about \$400 million. Building such a link would be a useful Partnership For Peace project.

## **(5) Stabilizing Kosovo.**

Unless Milosevic increases repression in Kosovo, another public warning from the United States could backfire by giving radical Albanians the hope that the US would intervene directly. Any further warnings should be given in private. But there are three other steps the US could take: *First*, there is unanimity in the region that lifting sanctions on Serbia completely without defusing Kosovo could heighten tensions. Milosevic would feel he had a freer hand and Kosovars would feel abandoned. Some sanctions should remain linked to Kosovo as well as Bosnia. *Second*, renewed efforts to reinsert CSCE monitors into Kosovo could ease tensions and provide early warning prior to a major incident. *Third*, the US should update its contingency plans to deal with Serbia militarily should civil conflict explode in Kosovo.

## **(6) The Potential Refugee Problem.**

No viable plans exist for managing Kosovar refugees. Yet it is those refugees who could trigger wider conflict. Macedonia would move them to the south for temporary housing, a move which would surely cause a Greek response. Refugees would likely have to be intercepted north of Skopje and diverted to temporary camps in Albanian areas of Macedonia near Tetovo. Additional steps would be needed to assure that the refugee camps not become base camps for guerilla activity back in Kosovo. This danger would require extensive planning, a rapid reaction capability, and cooperation with Greece. Macedonia has not begun to think seriously about the unthinkable, but that roadblock must be overcome.

#### **(7) Economic and Military Assistance to Macedonia.**

\$20 to \$30 million in emergency economic assistance is needed for Macedonia to provide additional petroleum and to offset the cost of back wages for Skopje's underemployed. The alternative is runaway inflation, since Skopje would print money to pay the salaries. Budget support for Skopje is critical, given the twin embargoes it faces, so EU members should be encouraged to participate on an emergency basis.

Macedonian armed forces include 15,000 troops and virtually no military equipment. All the tanks, fighter aircraft and heavy artillery stationed in Macedonia before the breakup of Yugoslavia were taken to Serbia by the Yugoslav Army. US military advice would be welcome and would have significant influence over the development of Macedonian armed forces, but the number of advisors should be kept small. Training for crowd control might pay high dividends. If the arms embargo on the former Yugoslavia is lifted for Slovenia and Croatia, Macedonia should be made eligible for military equipment.

#### **(8) Military Assistance to Albania.**

Albania's poorly trained and equipped forces are deployed purely defensively. Transfer of basic non-lethal equipment would gain support for US policies. The situation could be improved by setting up a system in Germany to identify Excess Defense Articles appropriate for Albania. Providing a US defense advisor to supplement our military-to-military contact group would help. We should resist providing lethal equipment to Albania for now, since it could easily end up in Kosovo.

## **Recommendations**

### **• Short Term**

- The US should move fairly quickly to extend diplomatic relations to Macedonia.
- The US should provide an emergency economic aid package to reduce Macedonian unrest.
- The US should renew efforts to reinsert CSCE monitors into Kosovo.

### **• Mid Term**

- There is no urgent need to increase the current US force levels in Macedonia. If the US decides to increase force levels to enhance deterrence, then it must be careful not to increase them beyond the current ratio of 50% of all UN forces.
- There is a need to engage EU countries more directly in Macedonia economically and

militarily.

- The EU should influence Greece to lift its embargo on Macedonia. An opportunity for compromise between Greece and Macedonia may exist after the October 16 elections.

- **Long Term**

- The EU should join the US in an economic consortium to improve the East-West trade infra- structure across Albania, Macedonia, and Bulgaria.
- Plans to manage large refugee migrations from Kosovo should be developed quickly to contain any conflict that might break out in Kosovo.
- The US should continue to link lifting its economic sanctions on Serbia to a resolution of the Kosovo issue.

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