

**UPDATE**

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## THE RISKS OF CLINTON'S BOSNIA PEACE PLAN

(Updating *Backgrounder Update* No. 250, "Clinton's Bosnia Folly," June 2, 1995, and *Backgrounder* No. 1012, "Don't Let Bosnia Destroy NATO," December 28, 1994.)

The impending diplomatic breakthrough in the Balkans has raised the prospect of a substantial American and allied military operation to police a Bosnian peace accord. Such an operation undoubtedly would entail an exercise in "peace-enforcement," with United States and allied troops using limited and selective enforcement measures to ensure the compliance of warring factions.

Knowing that this will not present U.S. forces either with a clearly defined, attainable military mission or with a decisive political objective, the Clinton Administration will try to sell the plan as a temporary and innocuous "peacekeeping" operation. The Administration maintains that this would involve only the limited deployment of approximately 25,000 American troops at a cost of \$1 billion. But some experts have concluded that the operation would cost two or three times this much and that it probably would involve more than 25,000 American troops over a period of several years.

In much the same way, the Bush Administration tried to sell the Somalia operation as a limited humanitarian enterprise. In fact, the Administration's initial pronouncements even suggested that the troops would be home in seven weeks, by Inauguration Day. But American troops did not leave Somalia until some 16 months later, their good work obscured by the Ranger debacle in Mogadishu, the incoherence of a United Nations-managed peace-enforcement operation, and the renewal of clan warfare in Somalia. The Clinton Administration's planned deployment of American troops to Bosnia is fraught with much greater danger than was faced in Somalia and raises several strategic dilemmas. Some of these, concerning mission objectives, timetables, command and control, and rules of engagement, have been raised by GOP leaders in Congress. Others still need to be addressed:

**X NATO Involvement.** Because of a rash promise by President Clinton, the U.S. is committed to a major role in implementing a Bosnian peace plan. This in itself should spark a major debate. How did NATO, America's principal security alliance, become a back-door conduit for heavy ground involvement in a conflict of marginal interest to U.S. security concerns?

In 1992, the world heard that this was the "hour of Europe"; in 1995, the U.S. hears once again that its European allies are leery of decisive commitments in the absence of American leadership. The U.S. obviously must lead NATO, but saying no to an ill-conceived peace-enforcement mission with vague and undefined objectives is clearer evidence of leadership than throwing troops into a losing cause. Significant U.S. participation in any NATO enterprise should be contingent on two things: a clear and present danger to the security and stability of Europe, and a mission with clearly defined political and military goals.

Is NATO the proper vehicle for a Bosnian peace force? Should an alliance starved of credibility and uncertain of its future structure tackle internecine, ethnic conflict in Bosnia? A NATO Balkan peace-enforcement force could have several unfortunate consequences. For example, it could unleash dissension at the very time NATO is trying to expand. Much as Somalia split the U.N. coalition, the ups and downs of the Bosnian mission could split the European alliance. Faced with the demonstrated intransigence of the belligerents, NATO could experience a resumption of the divergent approaches and internal squabbling that plagued its response to Bosnia in 1993-1994. A Bosnian peace force, under current circumstances, has precious little to offer NATO during a critical phase in its evolution. NATO should not allow a poorly crafted, self-fulfilling prophesy to lure it into accepting this mission.

- X **U.S. Troops as "Peacekeepers."** Peacekeeping is an exercise in which the peacekeepers are accepted as honest brokers, neutral and impartial. Because peacekeepers are deployed after an accord has been reached, they operate only in a supervisory role and are forced to rely on the good will and cooperation of the belligerents. President Clinton claims that the U.S. force would be structured for a "peaceful" and "uneventful" mission.

But as currently planned, this would not be a classic peacekeeping operation. So far in Bosnia there is no peace to keep. If U.S. ground troops are sent into Bosnia without a firm peace settlement, they will not be going in as neutrals. The United States, for better or for worse, has just completed a sustained air offensive against one side in the Bosnian conflict. While America may see itself as the impartial hand that "leveled the playing field," the Bosnian Serbs most certainly do not. They were on the receiving end of hundreds of airstrikes from NATO aircraft and American cruise missiles. In addition, the Clinton Administration plans to train the Bosnian Muslim forces while simultaneously acting as peacekeepers. Does the Administration really think the Serbs will accept American ground troops as impartial and neutral peacekeepers?

The U.S. has made this hazardous assumption twice before in recent years: In Lebanon, in 1983, U.S. air and naval forces attacked Druze and Shiite militia positions while maintaining a "neutral" peacekeeping force in Beirut. Within days of the strikes, over 240 U.S. Marines were dead after a terrorist suicide strike against their barracks.

In Somalia, the U.S. also chose to attack one belligerent party while professing neutrality. The actions against Mohammed Aideed's party drew American troops into the conflict as if they were yet another local faction—the only one without the political will to slug it out in the bloody back streets of Mogadishu.

- X **"Mission Creep."** Mission creep, the unintentional acceptance of new missions and mandates, is built into the Clinton plan for a Bosnian peace force. A force of 25,000 American soldiers is the absolute minimum needed to give the U.S. the security it needs to operate in Bosnia. A smaller force would be hopelessly exposed and unable to accomplish much of anything.

Since 25,000 troops are the minimum for protection alone, the question becomes how a peace plan will be imposed on the belligerents. The answer could be: Call for more troops. This is exactly what happened in Somalia after the street battles of October 3, 1993. Within weeks, Clinton was forced to deploy an additional 15,000 troops to Somalia to ensure the security of a few thousand American soldiers operating with the U.N. mission. A force of 25,000 American troops for Bosnia anticipates a best-case scenario. Any deterioration of this scenario must lead to greater American participation.

## CONCLUSION

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The President's idea of peacekeeping in Bosnia would not be peacekeeping at all. As yet, there is no peace to keep. The Clinton plan amounts to peace-enforcement in a dangerous and hostile environment. This is why NATO is planning for 50,000-70,000 heavily armed combat troops and not the lightly armed observers more common to peacekeeping missions.

Should a truly conclusive peace settlement be reached in Bosnia, and peacekeeping become possible, America should support a NATO peace force with strategic airlift, logistics, intelligence, and—in the case of extreme emergency—combat air support and possibly some ground troops. There is nothing to gain, either for America or for the peacekeeping force, by deploying substantial American ground forces in this risky adventure. American ground troops offer no operational advantage to the force. They are merely a political backstop for reluctant European allies. Based upon America's experiences in Lebanon and Somalia, it is obvious that participation by American ground troops could damage mission credibility and undermine the peace America and its allies are attempting to preserve.

While the U.S. should agree in principle to support NATO peace-enforcement operations when they make sense—in other words, when the mission and political objectives are clear—it should not commit itself to a deal that is bound to fail. In order to honor U.S. security commitments, America should be willing to deploy troops for lesser regional conflicts, and even for peacekeeping. However, it should do so only in cases where the benefits of success outweigh the risks of failure. The Clinton “peacekeeping” plan is not one of those cases.

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