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## **DAMPENING THE TINDERBOX: WHAT THE U.S. SHOULD DO ABOUT KOSOVO**

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Fears that ethnic violence in Kosovo, the southern province of Serbia, will spread to neighboring countries have raised the question of outside military intervention. Last week, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) agreed to expand military exercises with Albania and Macedonia, while accelerating contingency planning for more extensive deployments that may include intervention in Kosovo itself. With events threatening to spiral out of control, the United States needs to implement a containment strategy that avoids another open-ended commitment of its ground troops in the Balkans.

### **ANATOMY OF A CRISIS**

Ethnic Albanians comprise 90 percent of the Kosovo's 2.2 million people; Serbian leaders, however, call it the "cradle" of Serb culture. In 1989, Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic stripped Kosovo of self-rule and imposed a virtual police state. The Albanian majority held underground elections and formed a shadow government in 1992. This self-declared Republic of Kosovo, which no country has recognized formally, finances an extensive array of public services, including hospitals and schools. Ibrahim Rugova, recently re-elected as President, seeks to win political independence through nonviolent resistance.

Rugova's inability to assuage Serbian repression has fueled the growth of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which operates outside his control and is dedicated to armed resistance against Serbian rule. Its ranks have swelled since March 1998, when Serbian paramilitary forces massacred dozens

of civilians. The KLA reportedly controls nearly 40 percent of the province.

### **INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE REMAINS MUDDLED**

At U.S. urging, Rugova and Milosevic met on May 15 in Belgrade and agreed to weekly meetings of their staffs to discuss Kosovo's future status. In the short term, however, the prospects for a negotiated settlement appear slim: Rugova's commitment to independence is offset by Milosevic's determination to keep the province part of Serbia.

President Bill Clinton has yet to articulate a coherent plan to contain the Kosovo crisis. Instead, the Clinton Administration has allowed the Contact Group—Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the United States—to define the international response to Kosovo. The Contact Group has done little more than issue a raft of bland statements imploring all parties to exercise greater restraint. The United Nations Security Council has imposed an arms embargo against Yugoslavia, a largely symbolic gesture

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because the country is awash with weapons. If the crisis escalates, international pressure for outside intervention is certain to increase.

### CLARIFYING U.S. INTERESTS

To develop a coherent approach to Kosovo, the United States first needs to define its security interests with greater clarity. The United States has an interest in preventing violence from spreading to neighboring countries. It would be disastrous if NATO allies Greece and Turkey became ensnared in Balkan strife.

Committing U.S. ground forces to Kosovo or along its borders, however, would not be wise. According to NATO, as many as 20,000 troops may be necessary to secure the mountainous 100-mile border between Kosovo and Albania. If such a deployment involved U.S. troops, it would crimp the ability of the United States to honor vital security commitments elsewhere.

History shows that Balkan conflicts defy quick solutions by outside parties. By conditioning the withdrawal of U.S. troops on vague criteria, the Clinton Administration, in effect, has committed the United States to an open-ended deployment in Bosnia. Absent a well-defined Kosovo policy, the United States risks stumbling into another protracted commitment. Public support for another Balkan peacekeeping deployment appears to be nonexistent.

### DEVELOPING A CONTAINMENT POLICY

U.S. policy should seek to contain the violence while avoiding another protracted commitment of U.S. troops in the Balkans. Kosovo's political status as a province of Serbia has become untenable; a return to the status before hostilities appears equally impractical. The United States should pressure Serbia to grant the province greater autonomy while providing incentives for the KLA to defer the question of political independence. To these ends, the United States should:

- **Dampen expectations of another major U.S. or NATO ground commitment in the Balkans.** A major ground commitment is not necessary for an effective containment strategy. The United States should not give party the impression it is willing to enforce a Dayton-like agreement for Kosovo.
- **Oppose lifting sanctions against Yugoslavia**

**and readmitting it into the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.** Sanctions should not be lifted until Serbia sharply reduces its military presence in Kosovo.

- **Support robust NATO air strikes if Serbia violates the sovereignty of neighboring states.** A credible containment strategy requires incentives for compliance. NATO should pummel any Yugoslavian military forces that cross the borders of Albania or Macedonia. If NATO is unwilling to take appropriate action, the United States should be prepared to act alone.
- **Pressure Greek and Turkish officials to discuss ways to alleviate potential misunderstandings if violence in Kosovo spreads to neighboring countries.** NATO is the logical forum for its two member-states to discuss confidence-building measures.
- **Strengthen bilateral relations with Macedonia and Albania to improve the ability of these countries to protect their borders.** Tightly focused bilateral military exercises and increased military-to-military contacts should complement broader multi-lateral initiatives to promote regional stability.
- **Support efforts to shift the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force in Macedonia under NATO's control.** The mandate for this force, which includes 350 U.S. soldiers, expires August 31, 1998. Placing the troops under NATO control will provide greater freedom of action and indicate NATO's resolve to contain the Kosovo crisis.

### CONCLUSION

There are no risk-free options concerning the Kosovo crisis. The United States nevertheless should strive to prevent a regional conflagration without committing ground troops to another open-ended deployment in the Balkans. Unless the United States takes the initiative, the United Nations, NATO, and the Contact Group will continue a reactive strategy that already has proved ineffectual in dampening the Kosovo tinderbox.

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