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No U.S. Ground Troops in Kosovo

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The brutal campaign by Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic against the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) has destroyed 200 villages in the province of Kosovo and displaced nearly a quarter-million civilians, leaving many without shelter as winter approaches. Milosevic's ruthlessness, and concerns that the violence in Kosovo could spread, have prompted NATO to threaten air and cruise missile strikes, and possibly ground intervention. Before acting, however, NATO needs to clarify its policy objectives and explain how military force will support them. If NATO intervenes on the ground in Kosovo, the U.S. can provide intelligence and communications support, but it should avoid committing American combat troops to another open-ended Balkan deployment.

CRISIS BACKGROUND

Ethnic Albanians comprise 90 percent of Kosovo's 2.2 million people. Milosevic stripped Kosovo of self-rule in 1989 and imposed a virtual police state. In 1992, the Albanian majority held underground elections and formed a shadow government, the self-declared Republic of Kosovo. Since then, Serbian repression has fueled the growth of the KLA, whose ranks have swelled since March 1998 when Serbian paramilitary forces massacred dozens of civilians.

As a signatory of the 1995 Dayton Accords, Milosevic was long considered the linchpin to Balkan stability. Now he is viewed, widely and rightly, as a destabilizing force. He has ignored repeated pleas for a negotiated end to the violence in Kosovo. On September 23, the United Nations Security

Council passed a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire, an end to Serbian attacks on civilians, and a withdrawal of Serbian forces responsible for repressing civilians. In moves intended to forestall NATO intervention, Serbia has declared "victory" over the KLA and withdrawn some of its forces from Kosovo, but Serbian police and military forces nevertheless continue to attack KLA forces and civilian targets.

MILITARY STRIKES ALONE WILL ACHIEVE LITTLE

Milosevic's brutal campaign against the KLA and Kosovo's civilians risks igniting a wider Balkan war. Thousands of refugees already have fled, creating the potential for political unrest in neighboring Albania and Macedonia. The United States has an interest in preventing the violence from spreading; it would be disastrous, for example, if NATO allies Greece and Turkey became ensnared in Balkan strife. The question is how best to contain the crisis and pressure Milosevic to grant Kosovo a greater measure of autonomy without miring U.S. combat troops in another open-ended deployment.

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Unfortunately, President Bill Clinton has yet to articulate a coherent plan to achieve either aim. As a result, several U.S. allies, including Britain, France, and Germany, have stepped into the vacuum to call for forceful NATO action if Milosevic refuses to back down. It is not yet clear, however, whether NATO's proposed air and missile strikes are intended to cripple Milosevic's ability to wage war, address the looming humanitarian crisis, or somehow achieve both aims. Nor is it clear whether these strikes are intended as a substitute for a major NATO ground intervention in Kosovo or merely as a prelude to such a deployment. The U.S. should not back NATO military action unless these fundamental questions have been answered.

Regardless of whether NATO intervenes militarily, the United States should assist in international efforts to bolster the political opposition in Serbia. Among other activities, this should include more high-level meetings with and diplomatic support for opposition leaders. In the absence of any coherent strategy to nurture political opposition to Milosevic, NATO military strikes inadvertently could boost his popularity and even strengthen his resolve to destroy what remains of the KLA, whatever the cost to the civilian population.

AVOIDING ANOTHER OPEN-ENDED BALKAN COMMITMENT

Whether or not NATO resorts to air and missile strikes, U.S. ground troops should not be deployed to Kosovo, either as peace enforcers or as peacekeepers. U.S. troops have been deployed to Bosnia-Herzegovina since 1995 at a cost of more than \$9 billion. More than 8,000 troops remain there, with no withdrawal in sight, even though President Clinton promised that U.S. participation in the Bosnia mission would last no more than one year. Stretching U.S. military assets to cover yet another Balkan commitment would curb the United States' ability to respond in other trouble spots, such as the Middle East or the Korean Peninsula, where its vital national security interests remain at risk.

There is no need to deploy U.S. ground troops in Kosovo if NATO eventually decides to intervene in the strife-torn province. NATO is comprised of 16 member states. (Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic will swell its ranks to 19 next year.) If the United States' NATO allies do summon the political will to intervene—either as peacekeepers or as peace enforcers—they should bear the onus of providing ground troops to support such an intervention.

CONCLUSION

Deploying U.S. ground troops to Kosovo would undermine the ability of the United States to honor security obligations elsewhere in the world. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton, testified recently before the U.S. Senate that the U.S. military already is experiencing serious readiness problems. Thus, the United States should not give the impression that it is leaning toward enforcing a Dayton-like agreement for Kosovo. The United States should not act as though it cares more about European security than its NATO allies do.

If NATO intervenes with troops in Kosovo, the U.S. can assist its NATO partners with communications and intelligence support and back a political strategy aimed at boosting Serbian opposition to Milosevic without risking another open-ended commitment of ground forces in the Balkans. It is a mistake, however, to think the U.S. cannot exercise alliance "leadership" without deploying combat troops. Left unchallenged, this fallacy will encourage the promiscuous deployment of U.S. ground troops—in Kosovo and elsewhere—regardless whether vital U.S. national interests are at stake.

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