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AVOIDING ANOTHER BALKAN QUAGMIRE IN KOSOVO

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) stands at the brink of another costly and protracted intervention in the Balkans, this time in Kosovo, a province of Serbia, Yugoslavia's dominant republic. Unfortunately, NATO intervention in Kosovo is not likely to produce a durable peace or prevent Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic from fomenting further crises in the region. This proposed commitment also would undermine the ability of the United States to meet vital national security obligations elsewhere in the world and hasten NATO's transformation from a defensive military alliance into a Balkan police force.

The Seeds of Instability. President Milosevic stripped Kosovo of self-rule in 1989 and imposed a virtual police state. In 1992, the Albanian majority (90 percent of the population) held underground elections and formed a shadow government, the self-declared Republic of Kosovo. Since that time, repression by Serbia has fueled the growth of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

In October 1998, U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke brokered a cease-fire agreement between the KLA and the Serbians, but President Milosevic reneged on his promises and the agreement never took root. The massacre of 45 ethnic Albanians in January 1999, coupled with the threat of a full-scale resumption of hostilities in the spring, prompted the six-member Contact Group (Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the United States) to seek a more durable solution to the violence.

The Rambouillet Gambit. Under the threat of NATO air strikes, the Contact Group has pressured Yugoslav Federation and Serbian authorities to meet Kosovo's ethnic Albanian leaders at the Chateau de Rambouillet in France. The Contact Group hopes the parties will sign a three-year interim settlement that provides greater political autonomy to Kosovo, the withdrawal of most Serbian military forces, protection of minorities, and a more equitable ethnic representation among local police.

Neither the KLA nor its Serbian counterpart has demonstrated much interest in a peaceful settlement, however, and it is doubtful that a meaningful agreement can be reached by the Contact Group's February 19 deadline. The two delegations at Rambouillet have refused to speak with one another directly, thus forcing international mediators to shuttle between them. All ethnic Albanian political factions in Kosovo are united in their desire for political independence, even though they differ regarding the best means to this end. The KLA's ironclad determination to win independence is

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matched by Serbia's unshakable desire to preserve its sovereignty.

Another Bosnia? Despite the slim prospect that a durable agreement will emerge from the Rambouillet peace talks, the Clinton Administration nevertheless has indicated its willingness to support NATO's proposed deployment of nearly 30,000 peacekeeping troops to Kosovo, a costly gambit to "buy time" in the hope of securing a more permanent agreement at some point in the future. The United States could dispatch as many as 5,000 troops to Kosovo and place them under the command of a British general.

Hoping to preempt criticism that it is lurching toward another Balkan quagmire, the Clinton Administration has promised that it would not deploy any forces to Kosovo without a clear "exit strategy." This is not the first time Americans have heard such a promise. More than three years after the 1995 Dayton Accords, nearly 7,000 U.S. troops remain in Bosnia even though President Bill Clinton initially promised the deployment would last just one year. Stretching U.S. military assets to cover yet another ill-defined peacekeeping mission will further undermine the ability of the United States to defend its vital national security interests in Asia and the Middle East.

NATO's proposed deployment in Kosovo reveals how far the organization has strayed beyond its *raison d'être* as a defensive military alliance, as spelled out in the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty. With 32,000 troops already committed to an open-ended peacekeeping mission in Bosnia, NATO is in grave danger of turning into a Balkan police force; deploying NATO forces to Kosovo will serve only to hasten this transformation.

Playing Hardball with Milosevic. Regardless of whether NATO intervenes militarily in Kosovo, the United States should bolster international efforts to assist the political opposition to President Milosevic's iron-fisted rule. The United States should redouble efforts to foster a government in Belgrade that respects the rule of law. These activities should include meeting more frequently at high levels with, and providing diplomatic support for, opposition leaders; reducing sharply the number of

official contacts with the Milosevic regime; designing programs to foster independent trade unions and professional groups; and placing intense pressure on Belgrade to allow greater freedom of the press.

In developing this approach, the United States should emphasize that its relations with the Yugoslav Federation will remain strained so long as President Milosevic and his coterie of thugs remain in power. The Clinton Administration should pledge to lift punitive sanctions after the Milosevic regime is replaced with democratic leaders committed to the rule of law. If properly developed and sustained, a focused political strategy along these lines would provide a credible alternative to the massive military intervention scheme NATO is contemplating.

Conclusion. There are no quick or easy answers to ending the cycle of carnage in the Balkans. But some policy choices are better than others. The United States should avoid committing itself to enforcing any "interim" agreement in which the signatories attempted to paper over irreconcilable goals. U.S. interests in containing further Balkan bloodshed would be better served by backing a concerted political strategy aimed at cultivating democratic opposition to President Milosevic's heavy-handed rule. If, however, NATO forces intervened in Kosovo—either as peacekeepers or combatants—the United States could provide its allies with intelligence and communications support, but it should avoid committing ground troops.

Even superpowers must prioritize military commitments and husband their resources. Today, the U.S. military faces its worst personnel crisis since Congress ended the draft in 1973. President Clinton's penchant for far-flung peacekeeping missions to strategic backwaters undermines the military's ability to recruit and retain qualified personnel. It is sadly ironic that the Administration is contemplating yet another Balkan commitment as U.S. military readiness is nearing its breaking point.

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