



Executive Memorandum

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FLARE-UP IN THE BALKANS: HOW THE U.S. CAN AVOID DISASTER IN MACEDONIA

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The geopolitical haziness of President Clinton's involvement in the Balkans has led indirectly to a dangerous flare-up of violence in Macedonia. The Bush Administration must move quickly and decisively to contain the outbreak of fighting through indirect means while at the same time avoiding mission creep. Failure to heed this warning could lead the U.S. to become irrevocably trapped in the Balkan quagmire.

Following the NATO air war with Serbia, a three-mile-wide buffer zone was created in southern Serbia surrounding the UN-administered province of Kosovo. While the zone remains part of Serbia, it is populated largely by ethnic Albanians. In an effort to assuage their fears, NATO decreed that Serb police could operate in the zone only with light weapons. However, it has been Albanian militants and not the Serbs who have used the buffer zone to gain a military advantage. Separatist Albanian forces have occupied a portion of the zone since November of last year, using its protection to train their fighters and to attack Serbs in the zone and, more seriously, the heretofore peaceful neighboring country of Macedonia.

There is no disputing that the core of the Albanian rebel troops now fighting in Macedonia can be traced back to Kosovo. The Macedonian government speculates that between 60 percent and 75 percent of the rebels are from the province, and the rebels acknowledge that their core fighters are vet-

erans of the Kosovo war. Between 500 and 2,000 well-equipped and well-trained rebels are battling Macedonian troops on the hills overlooking Tetovo, the second largest city in Macedonia and *de facto* capital of the Albanian minority. Out of a population of 2 million, two-thirds of Macedonians are Slavs and the remaining one-third are ethnic Albanian. Yet despite this potentially volatile mix, Macedonia has been a bastion of multiethnic harmony compared to the other states in the region.

The largest ethnic Albanian political party, the Democratic Party of Albanians, is the junior member of Macedonia's present governing coalition. Such political success has given the Albanians better access to jobs and bank loans, representation in the local police force, a private Albanian-language university, and more say in their daily lives. As Albanians are gaining through politics what the insurgents claim to be seeking through force, there is no obvious need for the Albanians in Macedonia to be liberated.

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The rebels' aims are a vague mixture: to gain more decentralization of power within the Macedonian state; protect lucrative and recently threatened mafia links across the border; and, most dangerously, create a "Greater Kosovo" linking the Albanians in Kosovo, southern Serbia, and western Macedonia into one independent political entity. But if the goals of the National Liberation Army (NLA) are hazy, its tactics follow the familiar pattern employed by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Kosovo: Start a guerrilla war, hope for an overreaction by authorities that galvanizes ethnic tensions, and then appeal to outside powers for help. The NLA hopes these tactics can be repeated in Macedonia.

This crisis was only too likely to arise. By intervening in support of the KLA, America tied itself to an organization whose geopolitical interests (independence and a Greater Albania) are entirely different from those of the United States. Many in America are now predictably confused as to why such an ally is behaving contrary to American interests. The Bush Administration must limit America's role in the Balkans if a military calamity is to be avoided. Specifically, the U.S. should:

1. **Change its mindset in the Balkans to allow its regional foreign policy to work.** The new Administration must get over the past demonization of the Serbs and take the threat of Albanian separatism seriously. Regional stability is best served by closer ties with the democratic governments of the region, including that of President Kostunica and Prime Minister Djindic of Yugoslavia. It is Kosovar desires for a Greater Albania that pose the greatest danger to peace. Given the Clinton Administration's actions, such an about-face will prove intellectually difficult, but it is essential if America's role in the region is to remain limited.
2. **Allow the Serbs to gradually reoccupy the entire buffer zone.** This would give the Albanian insurgents one less safe haven in which to train and regroup. The Serbs already have been allowed to enter a three-mile portion of the zone while being constantly monitored by UN and European Union (EU) observers, so far

without incident. By carefully monitoring the Serbs' actions and allowing their military to return to the sovereign territory of Serbia, the Administration can bolster the democratic Kostunica government while limiting direct American military involvement in the conflict—which must remain its paramount goal.

3. **Resolutely avoid direct military involvement in the Macedonian conflict.** Other foreign policy tools can be employed against the rebels. The U.S. should follow the diplomatic lead of the EU and the Macedonian government in not advocating NATO military involvement. However, it should support the Macedonian government's efforts to quell attempts to establish a Greater Kosovo. Reconfiguring troop deployments in Kosovo will enable the U.S. and the other NATO allies to police the border between the province and Macedonia more vigorously, cutting the rebels' supply lines and starving them of men and materiel. As the peacekeepers will face the serious logistical challenge of patrolling mountainous forests that provide ideal cover for clandestine supply routes, it is also essential that the U.S. share intelligence data on where guerrilla forces are located, including photo reconnaissance, with the Macedonian government.

By shaping a more realistic regional geopolitical vision and supporting the Macedonian government short of direct military involvement, the Bush Administration can help defuse the greatest current threat to regional stability—the desire to create a Greater Albania—while avoiding unnecessary military involvement. Such an option, while far from perfect, would represent a sea change from Clinton policies in the region and could encourage democratic political forces, such as the Macedonians and the Serbia of Kostunica, that can best contribute to regional stability.

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