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DON'T LET BOSNIA DESTROY NATO

INTRODUCTION

To reverse the tide of war in Bosnia, many in the United States have called for a withdrawal of the U.N. peacekeeping operation as a first step toward a stronger Western response to Serbian aggression. On December 8, President Clinton announced that the U.S. would commit as many as 12,000 American troops to assist in this withdrawal if necessary.¹ Some would go farther, urging the U.S. to arm the Bosnian government forces and conduct a Desert Storm-style air offensive against Serbia and the Bosnian Serbs as a way of forcing them to "accept an armed truce."²

"Bosnia hawks" see the crisis as an important test of U.S. and NATO resolve that will determine the future of the Atlantic alliance, calling to mind American leadership provided throughout the Cold War. To save NATO, they are willing to "Americanize" the conflict to save Bosnia.

But it may be exactly the opposite: Misguided attempts to save Bosnia may destroy NATO by trying to force it to do what it cannot. During the Cold War, U.S. leadership was made possible by the consensus that NATO was united against a common threat to each member-state's national interest: Soviet aggression. While there were disputes between the allies on a variety of other matters such as trade, macroeconomic policy, or foreign policies elsewhere, the clear and present danger imposed by the Soviet Union allowed for unity behind strong U.S. leadership in Europe.

With the end of the Cold War, the consensus that holds the alliance together is much less clear. The coincidence of national interests goes no deeper than a desire to remain united against the possible re-emergence of a hostile Russia. By contrast, Europe's view of the crisis in Bosnia is different from Washington's. From the European perspective, it

1 Bill Gertz, "U.S. troops to assist in Bosnia pullout," *The Washington Times*, December 9, 1994, p. A1.

2 Steven Greenhouse, "Gingrich Is Urging a Tougher Policy On Bosnia's Serbs," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1994, p. A1.

is a localized conflict that will only be worsened by U.S. insistence on air strikes and arming the Bosnian government. Europeans fear a prolonged and widened war in Bosnia more than they do a Greater Serbia.

Thus, the U.S. inability to lead the European allies stems from their unwillingness to be led in a direction they feel is contrary to their own national interests. It is beside the point whether the U.S. or Europe is right about the correct policy toward the Serbs. The fact is that the Europeans—particularly the British and the French—believe the policy being advocated by Washington is contrary to their own national interests. The Europeans cannot be led where they refuse to go. Never in the history of NATO has the divide between national interests of the key allies been so deep or so apparent.

The U.S. must be careful not to tear the fabric of the alliance by stretching it to fit a crisis that is outside NATO's *raison d'être*. NATO remains important as a means of responding to America's vital interest in Europe: preventing the emergence of a dominant, anti-Western power. The alliance was created for that purpose, and until Russia completes its transformation to democratic capitalism, it will be too early to declare that Europe is free of the specter of a potentially hostile dominant power.

The U.S. will be able to lead the European allies in a very direct way on policies that respond to this strategic imperative, such as expanded membership to strengthen the bulwark against possible anti-Western hostility. But American leadership on non-strategic, regional matters—and Bosnia is just such a matter—should be aimed at getting the European allies to take responsibility for their own security concerns.

Some allies, notably the French, have long argued for European independence from the United States on security matters. Indeed, the concept of a "European security pillar" within the Atlantic alliance is explicitly agreed to in the treaty of European Union adopted at Maastricht, the Netherlands, in 1991. The crisis in Bosnia gives the allies an opportunity to establish such a pillar, and U.S. leadership should be aimed at encouraging them to do so. This task has been made more difficult by the presence of an incompetent U.N. presence that has served only to highlight the divisions between the U.S. and her European allies. The U.S. has been unable to lead allies in a direction they refuse to go; Clinton's decision to give his proxy for European leadership to the U.N. has only made matters worse.

The challenge now is to respond to the Bosnian war—a regional European conflict with no strategic implications for the U.S.—without tearing NATO apart. At the heart of this challenge is encouraging Europe to take responsibility for its own regional stability. This can be done by adopting a more flexible view of the alliance than was possible or desirable during the Cold War. In doing so, the Clinton Administration should:

- ✓ **Support and encourage the withdrawal of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR).** The U.N. operation has failed and has allowed the Europeans to avoid responsibility by shifting blame to the U.N. Security Council and Secretary-General.
- ✓ **Support lifting the U.N. arms embargo once U.N. peacekeepers are withdrawn.** If the allies favor doing so once their peacekeepers are withdrawn in order to allow Bosnia to defend itself, there is no reason the U.S. should oppose it.

- ✓ **Advise the European allies that they are free to conduct their own military operations, including air strikes and peacekeeping, if so inclined.** Clinton should offer the European allies the use of NATO headquarters, communications, or logistics capabilities if necessary. However, U.S. combat forces—air or ground—should not engage in NATO military operations in the Balkans.
- ✓ **Appoint a prominent Special Envoy and take the lead in seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis.** As a disinterested power, the U.S. can offer to broker negotiations among the belligerents and their European neighbors.

THE COLLAPSE OF U.N. MILITARY CREDIBILITY

The first step toward resolving the crisis in Bosnia is to acknowledge that the United Nations has no role to play. Nothing has become clearer than the fact that the United Nations is incapable of coordinating large-scale military operations. The forces assigned to the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the former Yugoslavia have been victims of confused command relationships and vague objectives. Confined to a role that precludes it from any military activity beyond self-defense, UNPROFOR has become little more than an observer force watching the military balance of power shift back and forth between the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) and Bosnian government troops.

The restrictions imposed on UNPROFOR have made a mockery of the so-called safe havens, Bosnian cities designated as protected zones by the United Nations. A November Bosnian Serb offensive has destroyed the “safe haven” in the northwest city of Bihac; the U.N. peacekeepers there have suffered the indignities of beatings and hostage-taking.³ Meanwhile, United Nations commanders in the region recently were reduced to pleading with the Serbs to allow a U.N. military convoy into Bihac to provide humanitarian relief to 1,200 Bangladeshi peacekeepers who had run out of food and were without cold-weather gear.⁴

The impotence of the U.N. peacekeeping force has heightened tensions within NATO, which is supposed to be conducting air strikes to check Serbian aggression. The airstrike operation has a cumbersome chain of command that requires the U.N. military commander to request a strike from the U.N. special envoy in the region, who defers to the U.N. Secretary-General in New York, who then often turns to the U.N. Security Council for approval. The command then issues forth back through the U.N. chain to the NATO headquarters in southern Italy, from which aircraft are ordered to perform the mission. As often as not, the reason for the air strike request has been overtaken by events long before permission is finally granted for NATO to conduct a strike.

Frustration with NATO. As a result of this marriage of inconvenience between the U.N. and NATO, the sheer incompetence of the former has damaged the latter’s own credibility. During a recent visit to Europe, Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) raised questions re-

3 Chuck Sudetic, “U.N. Says Serbs Fail to Keep Promise to Lift Obstructions,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 1994, p. 22.

4 Chuck Sudetic, “Clinton Writes to Reassure Bosnian Government of Support,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 1994, p. A12.

garding NATO's future relevance given its poor showing in Bosnia. Incoming Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich went even further, calling NATO "pathetic and helpless" because of its inability to block the Serbian advances through Bosnia.⁵

But frustration with NATO is misplaced. The chain of command between the United Nations and NATO has never been stronger than its weakest link: the U.N. The first step in restoring NATO's credibility is breaking that link and reaffirming the alliance as the only viable collective security organization in Europe.

Indeed, even as these new leaders of the U.S. Congress were expressing their skepticism about NATO, European leaders were reminding the President of how important they still believe the alliance is. During Clinton's recent trip to a European security summit in Budapest, his counterparts from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary reiterated their firm desire to join the Atlantic alliance as insurance against a possibly resurgent Russia.⁶ For his part, Russian President Boris Yeltsin stated his government's opposition to NATO expansion in no uncertain terms. A senior Yeltsin adviser said expansion would be seen as "an anti-Russian and hostile step."⁷

U.S. Frustration. Frustration among U.S. leaders reflects their desire that the war in Bosnia had gone differently. As has become all too clear in recent weeks, the Bosnian Serb Army is consolidating its victory in much of the territory claimed by the Bosnian government. Bosnia-Herzegovina now consists of a long border with Croatia in the southwest that wedges down to a thin edge to the northeast and is virtually surrounded by a Serb-controlled region of some 70 percent of former Bosnian territory.

Many in the U.S. have argued that the U.N.-imposed arms embargo on Bosnia is anachronistic. Legislation passed by the 103rd Congress forced President Clinton to announce in November that the U.S. would no longer participate in the embargo. Some would go even further, proposing that the U.S. and other countries arm and train the Bosnian forces to create a "balance of terror" that could force the Serbs to the negotiating table.⁸

SHOULD AMERICA BECOME MORE INVOLVED IN BOSNIA?

Beyond the vague notion that the U.S. must oppose aggression "at the very heart of Europe," no one urging a stronger American role has offered any plausible explanation of how this serves the U.S. national interest. The question remains: Why should it be so vital to the United States who controls a historically disputed corner of southern Europe if none of the region's own most powerful nations seems to care?

However unfair the Serb aggression, and however tragic the suffering and violence in the entire region, this conflict in the former Yugoslavia is of little strategic relevance to the United States. Supporters of a stronger U.S. response express an interest in preserv-

5 December 4, 1994, interview on NBC's "Meet the Press," cited in Greenhouse, "Gingrich Is Urging a Tougher Policy," p. A13.

6 Jane Perlez, "Unease at European Security Parley," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1994, p. A13.

7 "Yeltsin, Karaganov Oppose NATO Enlargement," *RFE/RL Daily Report*, December 5, 1994, p. 1.

8 Gingrich "Meet the Press" interview, *op. cit.*

ing stability in Europe, but they never make a convincing argument as to how Serbian aggression in Bosnia threatens Europe as a whole. Under no conceivable conclusion to this conflict does war between the larger European powers—which would be a legitimate concern for the United States—appear likely or even plausible. This could change in the future—if, for example, Russia were to take a more hostile course and offer direct support to the Serbs—but U.S. policy could be adjusted if that did occur.

Bosnia Is Not Munich, or Even Rwanda

Those supporting greater American involvement through massive air strikes or arming the Bosnian government often compare the situation in the Balkans with German aggression in Europe in the 1930s, with the West and the U.S. playing the appeasement role of Neville Chamberlain.⁹ This comparison stretches the imagination and ignores reality. Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, the putative Hitler seeking a “Serb *lebensraum*” in the Balkans, already has accepted the most recent peace agreement offered up by the key NATO allies and Russia (the “Contact Group.”) In that agreement, Serbs in Bosnia would be forced to give up nearly 30 percent of the territory they have won in battle. Moreover, even if Milosevic had not accepted this settlement, to compare Serbian skirmishes in a corner of southern Europe to Adolf Hitler’s declaration of a Teutonic “master race” and desire for domination of the entire European landmass is nothing more than historical revisionism.

As horrible as the conflict is, it pales in comparison not only to the Nazi holocaust, but also to the carnage in Rwanda earlier this year that led to the death in a few weeks’ time of a half-million people. This was pure genocide, but elicited no similar calls for U.S. action against aggression.

War on the Cheap: Ignoring the Risks of U.S. Intervention

Another argument often made by those wishing greater U.S. involvement is that U.S. credibility is on the line. This argument is self-fulfilling: As long as leaders in the United States suggest that more direct unilateral action by the U.S. is desirable, America’s subsequent actions will be judged against its declared intentions. If U.S. leaders hint at a Desert Storm-sized air assault, the U.S. can be faulted—with some justification—for not taking stronger action.

Moreover, those who advocate such action appear blind to its possible consequences. What if, for example, the air strikes they support fail to roll back Serb gains or check future aggression? This is a plausible outcome; Serbs already control some 70 percent of Bosnian-declared territory. The region is mountainous, and Serb forces are dispersed throughout. A Desert Storm-type assault against large, fixed formations of enemy troops is unlikely. A better comparison might be to Operation Rolling Thunder during the Vietnam war, when the U.S. dropped thousands of tons of bombs on a vastly inferior enemy but with little effect on the outcome of the war.

The Balkan bombing strategy is war on the cheap. Without the commitment to follow-through with ground troops capable of seizing territory—a commitment the Bosnia

⁹ See Senator Orrin Hatch, “Strategic misfires over Bosnia’s plight,” *The Washington Times*, December 7, 1994, for a recent example of this genre.

hawks uniformly eschew—bombing very likely will lead to a war of attrition that will test American resolve and credibility far more than has been the case thus far. The U.S. will have strapped itself to resolving a bloody war with limited means and with little public support or understanding at home.

The decision to arm the Bosnian government carries similar risks. With the Bosnian Serb Army in control of some 70 percent of Bosnian territory, it may be that only U.S.-supplied artillery, armor, and even combat aircraft and air defense weapons—and the ability to ship them quickly and in large numbers—could turn the tide for the Bosnian government. That could happen, though, only after much additional bloodshed and atrocities on both sides. The U.S. would find itself responsible for the fortunes of war in a country and a region of the world where its interests are uncertain and its commitment is weak.

A U.S. POLICY THAT REFLECTS AMERICAN INTERESTS

The U.S. has no vital interest in becoming militarily involved in a Balkan war, or even in saving the Bosnian state, as desirable as it may be to do so. U.S. vital interests in the region are limited to restoring some measure of NATO credibility and thus preserving NATO as a bulwark against the still-possible emergence of a dominant anti-Western state in Europe. Beyond that, the U.S. should encourage the European allies to assume responsibility for their own regional stability, perhaps even using NATO's structure as a point of departure.

Clinton must restore the balance between interests and desires that has been lost in the rhetoric of those urging a stronger U.S. response. Thus, in close consultation with the NATO allies and Russia, Clinton should:

✓ **Support and encourage the withdrawal of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR).**

There is nothing the U.N. can do to improve the prospects for Balkan peace except withdraw. UNPROFOR should be disbanded and U.N. Special Envoy Yasushi Akashi sent back to the bloated bureaucracy from whence he came. Moreover, there is no reason to endanger further the lives of troops making up the U.N. peacekeeping force. In any event, those forces would be withdrawn if the U.S. took unilateral military action as some are recommending. British and French officials in particular have advised the U.S. of this fact.¹⁰ They also have made no secret of their concerns about attacks on re-treating forces should a withdrawal be ordered.

Clinton's December 8 offer of troops to assist in a pullout was a mistake that may well lead to unnecessary American casualties and deeper U.S. involvement. He should offer instead to negotiate a cease-fire to permit the withdrawal, making it clear to both the Serbs and the Bosnian government that hostile acts against the U.N. forces will be met with a disproportionate response by NATO warplanes against belligerent forces and the capital of either side taking the action.

¹⁰ Greenhouse, "Gingrich Is Urging a Tougher Policy," p. A13.

- ✓ **Support lifting the U.N. arms embargo once U.N. peacekeepers are withdrawn.**

If the allies favor doing so once their peacekeepers are withdrawn in order to allow Bosnia to defend itself, there is no reason the U.S. should oppose it. The embargo makes little sense inasmuch as the country on which it was imposed—the former Yugoslavia—no longer exists. If the allies support lifting it once their troops are withdrawn with the U.N. peacekeeping force, the U.S. also should support doing so. At the same time, though, the U.S. should pledge not to rearm either side. This would permit the U.S. to distance itself further from the conflict commensurately with America's very limited interests in the region.

Resupplying the Bosnian government with weapons once the U.N. peacekeepers are withdrawn is not likely to do much to reverse the tide of this war. As has been widely reported, many Islamic countries, including Saudi Arabia, have long been violating the embargo to provide the Muslim-dominated Bosnian government in Sarajevo with weapons. This has been inadequate; Serb forces remain firmly in control of most disputed regions.

- ✓ **Advise the European allies that they are free to conduct their own military operations, including air strikes and peacekeeping, if so inclined.**

Clinton should offer the European allies the use of NATO headquarters, communications, or logistics capabilities if necessary. However, U.S. combat forces—air or ground—should not engage in NATO military operations in the Balkans.

To hear their rhetoric, allied leaders are very concerned about the war in Bosnia. For example, it dominated discussion at the December 5 summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. German leader Helmut Kohl declared the recent fall of Bihac at the hands of the Bosnian Serbs “an extreme barbarity”; the West's inability to stop it “can only be called a catastrophe.” Meanwhile, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said the situation has left him “embittered, disillusioned, and full of anxiety.”¹¹

If the allies are so concerned—a doubtful proposition given their lack of resolve thus far—the U.S. should do nothing to stop them from coordinating their own military response to the conflict. Clinton should invite Germany, Italy, France, Great Britain, or any other interested European ally to organize a task force under NATO auspices but without the promise of U.S. troops. The European members of NATO are fully capable of conducting air strikes or otherwise widening the war against the Serbs. The U.S. could provide logistic and communications support, or even intelligence-sharing, and permit the commander of this joint task force to use NATO headquarters facilities to conduct operations.

If, as is likely, the allies refuse to fight the Serbs, the task force could provide a presence in undisputed regions of the conflict. This includes Macedonia, where some 500 American peacekeepers are serving as part of the U.N. force aimed at preventing “a po-

11 Jane Perlez, “No Unity on Balkans at Europe Summit,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 1994, p. A12.

tential spillover of the Bosnian conflict.”¹² A NATO-inspired task force would be a more appropriate presence than any organization chartered by and accountable to the United Nations.

Alternatively, the task force could be redesignated as a peacekeeping force should a comprehensive settlement of the conflict be reached through negotiation. This would permit the Clinton Administration to withdraw its offer of as many as 25,000 troops to serve as peacekeepers in such an event.

In supporting a NATO task force, Clinton should endorse participation by interested non-NATO parties, possibly even Russian forces. The concept for such a proposal already exists as an element of the Partnership for Peace.¹³ The PFP was approved by all sixteen NATO members at their summit in January 1994. It establishes a loose but formal relationship among NATO, the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, and other interested countries in Europe. The PFP’s primary purpose is to serve as a precursor to expanded NATO membership.

Also approved at the January NATO summit, though, was the Combined Joint Task Force concept, by which a coalition of willing NATO/PFP states might come together for a military operation outside of the traditional area of NATO responsibility. It is no secret that this concept was designed by the Pentagon with the Bosnian conflict in mind.

A NATO-organized, non-U.S. Combined Joint Task Force in place of UNPROFOR recognizes the hierarchy of American priorities in southern Europe. If achieved, it would re-establish the primacy of NATO over the U.N. or other *ad hoc* arrangements as the means through which the United States expresses its interests in Europe. It would also properly force European allies to assume responsibility—within NATO—for what should be seen as a localized European conflict not calling for U.S. forces.

✓ **Appoint a prominent Special Envoy and take the lead in seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis.**

As a disinterested power, the U.S. can offer to broker negotiations among the belligerents and their European neighbors. The U.S. already has nudged the United Nations out of diplomatic responsibility for a negotiated settlement by establishing the Contact Group—the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, and Russia. Clinton should appoint a well-respected Special Envoy and enlarge the negotiations to include representatives from all the disputed regions—Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, and the Serb-held territory in Croatia (Krajina)—to pursue a comprehensive settlement.

12 Lawrence T. Di Rita and Baker Spring, “The Decline of U.S. Military Strength Since the Gulf War,” Heritage Foundation *F.Y.I.* No. 42, October 16, 1994, p. 5.

13 For a full discussion of the PFP, see Lawrence T. Di Rita, “Beyond the Partnership for Peace: An Action Plan for the NATO, Prague, and Moscow Summits,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 973, January 7, 1994.

CONCLUSION

The conflict in Bosnia is a tragedy that might have been avoided had the United States and her European allies taken different actions when it first began nearly three years ago. The fact that such decisions were not made, however, and the West's inability thus far to stop the bloodshed, is no reason for Americanizing this European regional conflict in a vain attempt to undo recent history. There is no need to compound past bad decisions with new ones.

The U.S. interest in Europe is limited to preventing a single anti-Western power from achieving dominance. America should lead NATO in defending that interest. But in regional conflicts such as the current war in the Balkans, American leadership should be targeted at getting the European allies to take responsibility for their own region. In either case, U.S. leadership cannot be given by proxy to the United Nations or any other body.

The first priority of American policy in the Bosnian conflict should be to break the link between the U.N. and NATO. This will be the first step toward finding a European solution to a European problem through the Atlantic alliance. It may also be the only way to save the NATO alliance.

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