
Defense Report

AUSA



Yugoslavia: Key to the Mediterranean?

Since World War II, the U.S. Sixth Fleet has made the Mediterranean Sea in essence a U.S. lake. Many military experts claim it is still a U.S. lake despite the large Soviet naval presence.

The strengths of the U.S. Sixth Fleet and its Soviet counterpart vary but the figures as announced by the Department of Defense in early July can be considered average. These were—U.S.: 49 ships including 34 combatants; USSR: 65 ships including 15 combatants. The experts point out that not only does the U.S. retain a considerable edge in combatants but the Sixth Fleet has an overriding edge in air power. It has aircraft carriers and the Soviets have none which can launch high performance fighter aircraft. Nor can the Soviets rely on land based air power as they have no air bases close enough to the Med to do the job.

This U.S. preponderance of power in the Med could be upset if land air bases became available to the USSR in any of the littoral nations around the Med, including Yugoslavia. And the future of Yugoslavia remains an enigma. Marshal Tito is 84 years old and some military strategists are concerned over the possibility of a Soviet takeover when Tito dies.

There is ample reason for concern. Yugoslavia, a nation of about 21 million people is made up of five different nationalities speaking five different languages and having three separate religions. The Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Albanians, and Montenegrans are unfriendly toward each other and Tito is credited with doing a remarkable job in holding them together.

When Tito dies, military planners fear that one of these national groups might seize power, claiming that they are the rightful rulers of the nation, and request Soviet military assistance to keep them in power. And that would be that unless the U.S. or other western powers intervened.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk said in 1968 that the U.S. is committed to keep the Soviets out of Yugoslavia. But today's political climate in the U.S. makes military intervention unlikely. In fact, recent polls indicate such a degree of indifference that most Americans are not quite sure where Yugoslavia is.

In any case, Soviet air bases in Yugoslavia would signal at least the beginning of the end of U.S. military supremacy in the Mediterranean. As one JCS planner has said, "Americans had better find out not only where Yugoslavia is located, but also just how important it is strategically to the United States."