

Defense Report

from AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare



[Editor's note: In April 1998, AUSA issued this Defense Report (DR 98-2) as a "heads-up" regarding the potential consequences of a war over Kosovo. A year later, it is still relevant.]

Implications of Kosovo: Another Balkans War?

For centuries the Balkan Peninsula has been the geographic crossroads for ethnic, religious and nationalistic fervor — where East meets West. The region includes Albania, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, European Turkey, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, the former Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Macedonia were able to break away from Yugoslavia, essentially without open conflict. Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, dissolved into civil war, pitting the centuries-old Muslim, Croat and Serb communities against one another. Both Serbia and Croatia actively supported their ethnic brothers in the fighting.

The 1995 Dayton Accords, along with the strong show of force exhibited by NATO subsequent to the United Nations effort, brought the fighting to an end. The continuing presence of NATO ground, air and sea forces has maintained the relative peace while attempts are made to put the political, economic and legal bases for stability into place.

Against this backdrop there has been international concern that ethnic conflict could erupt elsewhere in the region. Macedonia has been relatively peaceful, due in part to a continuing U.S. Army presence that lends legitimacy to U.S. and NATO resolve to keep abreast of developments in the area. The tense situation has been

contained. The same cannot be said for the Serbian province of Kosovo.

The situation in Kosovo has been uneasy throughout the post-World War II era. The potential for more violent eruption has increased since 1989, when the autonomy of the province under the former Yugoslavia was rescinded and it was placed under virtual martial law; in response, ethnic Albanians have put into effect their own state structure and openly advocate independence from Serbia. This situation, leading to periodic violent clashes between the Serbian government and the ethnic Albanian majority, has continued throughout the process of international peacekeeping fostered by the Dayton Accords. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) emerged and has initiated a paramilitary campaign to challenge Serbian authority.

In early March 1998, the Serbian government deployed forces to Kosovo to root out KLA leaders, in apparent response to previous incidents involving loss of life among Serbian policemen. The extensive violence and loss of life visited by the Serbian force upon ethnic Albanians, particularly women and children, has refocused international attention and resulted in some limited international sanctions and censure of the Yugoslav government.

Kosovo has an ethnic Albanian population of over 1.8 million and a Serb population of about 200,000. Though ethnic Albanians are now dominant in the

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region, Serbs regard Kosovo as symbolic of their own struggle for independence over the centuries. Consequently, any expression for independence by ethnic Albanians is met with resounding rejection from greater Serbia.

Of major concern to the international community, in particular NATO, the United Nations and, of course, the United States, is the potential for the recent Kosovo bloodshed to ignite an ethnic-based civil war — much like that in Bosnia–Herzegovina. More seriously, a broader war could develop involving several regional states that have traditionally sided with one side or the other. Other states in the region — Albania, Greece, Turkey — as well as other NATO members and Russia potentially can be drawn into a war.

How does the international community prevent escalation scenarios such as these from emerging from the present conflict? What instruments are available and potentially most effective? Which countries and international institutions are most appropriate and credible? Toward which countries should efforts be directed?

The answers are not readily discernible. In this era of global transformation, the 20th century political-military uses of power are not as workable. The traditional policies and methods of sanctions and embargoes, deterrence, containment and use of force — unilaterally or in coalition — may not be as workable in a complex scenario such as Kosovo.

The United States, as the sole superpower, has had thrust upon it responsibility for global engagement as the major proponent of democratic values. In this capacity, we are not able to stand idly by as the situation in Kosovo escalates, possibly out of control. This was learned, however belatedly, with the war of civilian attrition, retribution and ethnic cleansing that characterized the Bosnian War (now, however tentatively, stopped due to the presence of NATO forces).

The situation in Kosovo rides on a historical momentum with roots in the Middle Ages; generations of ethnic conflict underlie the present circumstances. With the potential for drawing Macedonia and Albania into the crisis in support of the ethnic Albanians comes the even more serious possibility of drawing Greece into the conflict in support of Serbia; and then escalation involving Turkey. With two NATO members on opposite sides of the conflict, the cohesion of NATO itself is ruptured. The scenario of escalation can be further extended to ultimately involve Russia and other European states.

At this point diplomats will attempt to prevail by imposing nonmilitary sanctions on Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Military Planners will be developing alternative options in the event forces are committed to the region. Whatever the politico-military decisions, they will need to be tempered with an appreciation of the potential broader scope and deeply rooted causes of the current conflict.

While there may be a role for military forces in implementing a political solution, no armed force alone can create a stable and viable political structure that will endure once the force is withdrawn. Policymakers must first put into place a nonpartisan, workable, politically realistic framework and not simply an ideologically appealing alternative. In seeking such a framework, international mediators, and the United States in particular, cannot be seen as taking sides; such will encourage intransigence of one side and foreclose pragmatic policy options.

The Kosovo situation has the potential for a continuation of the tragic history already written. The nature of any political approach, the effectiveness of any military intervention in bringing a measure of stability to the region, and the lasting effects of these efforts upon withdrawal will have an impact on the credibility and viability of NATO and the United States.