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The US and the Ground Option in Kosovo

A Working Paper

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Introduction

This analysis is part of a draft for a book to be issued by Praeger and Greenwood late in 2000. It will be revised and supplemented extensively in the final text.

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The “Ground Option:” The Possible Impact of NATO Planning for an Invasion

Many of the details surrounding NATO’s effort to plan a ground option remain unknown. So do the exact political circumstances surrounding NATO’s political announcements, like the statements that it had rejected a ground option at the beginning of the air and missile campaign. One of the great unknowns surround the air and missile campaign in Kosovo is the level of intelligence Serbia had on NATO plans, and the extent to which Serbia’s knowledge that it might face a NATO invasion led Serbia to terminate the conflict. NATO denied throughout the air and missile campaign that it was planning an invasion and this remained a serious option.¹

The most public rejection of a ground option came from the US President Clinton gave a television address on April 24th, the first day of the campaign, that, “I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.” At the same time, it is unclear that any NATO nation argued for a major ground option at the start of the air and missile campaign, or even for preserving the option as a means of putting political pressure on Serbia. Certainly, Greece and Italy actively opposed such an option at the start of the fighting, and France and Germany did not support it.

The Quiet Shift Towards a Ground Option

By mid-April, however, SACEUR General Wesley K. Clark had brought together British and US officers at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE) headquarters in Mons, Belgium, to reexamine the options for a ground invasion. Although the political leaders of the North Atlantic Council had not authorized such planning, the US Security Advisor Sandy Berger had persuaded Javier Solana, the Secretary General of NATO, to authorize such secret discussions. The large scale of ethnic cleansing, and the slow pace of the air and missile campaign, was forcing NATO to change its plans.

There are reports that President Clinton secretly decided to send in ground troops if the air and missile campaign failed shortly before NATO’s 50th anniversary summit meeting in Washington on April 25, 1999. While the senior US generals in the US command structure – including US Defense Secretary William Cohen and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry H. Shelton – do not seem to have endorsed a ground option, the NATO military staff does seem to have agreed that ground forces would be necessary and this judgment seems to have led both President Clinton and Prime Minister Blair to agree that a ground option might well be necessary.

This led to the formation of a secret invasion planning staff that included several dozen officers at Mons, and some 60 US personnel at the US Central Command (USCENTCOM) Headquarters in Stuttgart. At the same time, President Clinton persuaded Prime Minister Blair to drop public support for a ground option on the grounds that premature debate might divide the alliance and lead the Russians to end any diplomatic support of a peace initiative that favored NATO.

By mid-May, SHAPE seems to have come up with an option involving some 175,000 men, most of which would have to advance up the single road through Kukes to Kosovo. These were to be supported by helicopter attacks from Italy and a possible feint through Hungary.

NATO evidently rejected a full-scale invasion of Belgrade and chose an option that would protect the Kosovars in Kosovo.

This planning effort seems to have had enough German and Italian support so that US, German, and Italian military engineers cooperated in a contingency effort to strengthen the road through Kukes to take armored traffic, using the cover of improving the road to allow more rapid aid to the Kosovar refugees. This effort was essential because the road could not support M-1A1 tank traffic without such improvement. The planning for the ground option also seems to have led the US to step up its Special Forces support to the KLA.

Proceeding with the ground option did not win immediate support from Secretary Cohen and all the Joint Chiefs when it was briefed to them on May 19th. US support came largely from Sandy Berger and the civilians in President Clinton's security team. It was clear, however, that some of the chiefs did support Clark, and that President Clinton was tilting towards the ground option. It was also clear that a final decision would have to be taken by June 10th if the US was to have the 90 days of preparation time that it felt was essential to launch the ground option before winter. Even this schedule was ambitious, since Britain felt that at least 120 days of preparation time was required.

Putting All the Options on the Table

President Clinton very publicly announced on May 18th that, "all options are on the table," openly ended the flat rejection of the ground option he had made on March 24th. He also approved the positioning of up to 45,000 troops in Macedonia, including 7,500 US troops, that could either be used to support a ground option or occupy Kosovo if Milosevic conceded.

On May 23rd, President Clinton and Prime Minister Blair held a secret phone conversation in which they agreed to allow Solana to formulate a detailed plan for operations. British Defense Secretary George Robertson then organized a secret meeting in Bonn on May 27th that lasted from 10:00 to 16:30, and which included Cohen, Robertson, other senior allied defense officials and senior military officers from Germany, France, and Italy. Robertson also evidently pledged some 50,000 British troops to support a 150,000-man ground option – although this total implied that Britain would deploy half of its standing army and it is far from clear that Britain could have supported such a power projection effort without major US aid.²

There does not seem to have been a clear consensus at the meeting on May 27th. The German and Italian defense ministers did, however, show more support for a ground option than in the past, and France did not openly oppose it – although the French minister argued that there was insufficient time to prepare and execute an invasion before winter. Secretary Cohen seems to have argued that it was safer to rely on the air and missile campaign at the risk of dividing the alliance: "It was clear at that meeting that a consensus for ground forces was not going to materialize. I argued for intensifying the air war and for broadening and streamlining the target selection process."³

There still was no unified mandate for action. Nevertheless, the meeting does seem to have produced an agreement by British, France, Germany, Italy, and the US that NATO could not afford to lose a war, that progress in the air and missile campaign was less successful than NATO's public briefings implied, and that ground action would be required if the air and missile campaign did not succeed. This possibility became a real issue in late May when a KLA

offensive that began on May 27th led to a KLA defeat, and diplomatic negotiations failed to produce any clear signs of Serbian concessions.

Late May: On the Edge of Going to a Ground Option

President Clinton decided to delay action, hoping that the increasing intensity of NATO's air strikes might still force Serbia to withdraw. At the same time, the decision was taken to reexamine the ground option ten days later, and to deploy another engineering battalion to strengthen the road through Kukes to take tanks and heavy self-propelled artillery as well as lighter armored fighting vehicles. Preparations are also reported to have been serious enough so that German and British forces were standing by with pontoons and bridging tanks to allow NATO to use navigable waterways to bring in heavy equipment.

According to press reports, General Clark went to Washington on June 1st to try to persuade President Clinton to authorize the beginning of ground invasion on September 1st. The timing was growing steadily more urgent, and by this time the US build-up and deployment included up to 120,000 men and women. Britain too faced an urgent deadline, since its plans called for the call up of 30,000 reserves in early June.

At the same time, the growing political frustration over NATO's failure to win a quick victory led Berger to meet with outside security experts who supported a ground invasion on June 2nd. The meeting included critics like Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the former ambassador to the UN; Robert Hunter and William Taft (former ambassadors to NATO); General George A Joulwan, a former SACEUR; Helmut Sonnenfeldt, a former state Department official; Steve Larrabee of the Rand Corporation, and Ivo Daalder and Jeremy Rosner, who were former members of the staff of the National Security Council. He made it clear at this meeting that the Administration was closer to supporting a ground option than had previously been announced, and that it would do anything necessary to win, including a ground invasion.⁴ Berger is quoted as saying that the Clinton Administration still believed that the air campaign was working, but that the Administration was determined to win, and that the President had not ruled out the ground option.⁵

President Clinton was scheduled to meet again with the Joint Chiefs on June 3rd, and this was close to the deadline that Clark has set for announcing that the US was preparing for a ground option and mobilizing the necessary reserves in time to have 90 days in which to prepare the ground attack and still begin the operation before winter.

Ironically, however, June 3rd proved to be the day that Milosevic told the EU envoy Finnish President Martti Ahtissari, and the former Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, that he would accept their proposed peace agreement. The US did not trust Milosevic's initiative, however, and President Clinton met with the Joint Chiefs that same afternoon to discuss the invasion. Clark also reacted skeptically, and called for continued bombing and preparation for an invasion

As a result, the bombing continued down to the last day, and so did preparations for an invasion. This was one reason that NATO launched B-52 strikes to support the KLA on June 7th. NATO both wanted to avoid any further major defeat of its principle potential ally in an invasion, and to keep the border with Albania open for a later NATO invasion. General Clark is quoted as saying, "That mountain is not going to get lost. I'm not going to have Serbs on that mountain. We'll pay for that hill with American blood if we don't help (the KLA) hold it."⁶

This planning for the ground option would be an interesting historical footnote if it were not for the possibility that Serbian intelligence knew of the NATO effort, possibly with assistance from Russian intelligence. There are some indications that Serbia did know a great deal about the NATO effort, and that the knowledge that Serbia could not simply ride out the air and missile campaign without having to deal with a ground invasion was a key reason for Milosevic's concession. It is interesting to note, for example, that Major General Vladimir Lazarevic, the commander of the Serbian Pristina Corps, stated on May 26th that the KLA effort to open up a secure supply line to Kosovo from the round through Kukes and the area around Mount Pastrok was, "...the beginning of a new phase of operation, the so-called land invasion."

At the same time, Serbia may not have known the details of the NATO planning effort, and the Serbian commentary on an invasion may have referred only to the support Albania and others were giving the KLA. Alternatively, the Serbian leadership may have reacted to the many press reports indicating that NATO would eventually pursue a ground option if the air and missile campaign failed. It scarcely needed access to intelligence data to know this was a possibility. Furthermore, there is no way to rank Serbia's perception of this risk relative to the impact of the fact the air campaign was becoming more successful, and Serbia had failed to defeat the KLA.

Barring access to the highest levels of Serbian decision-making, it may never be possible to determine how much the NATO "ground option" contributed to the end of the war – or whether a NATO decision not to reject a ground option at the start of the war would have brought a quicker end to the fighting.

¹ This section is based largely on the excellent investigative reporting by Dana Priest in “A Decisive Battle that Never Was,” Washington Post, p. A-1, September 19, 20, and 21, 1999, and reporting by Steven Erlanger. “NATO was Closer to Ground War in Kosovo Than is Widely Realized,” New York Times, November 7, 1999, p. A-6.

² Reuters, September 30, 1999, 1158.

³ Washington Post, September 19, 1999, p. A-30.

⁴ Steven Erlanger. “NATO was Closer to Ground War in Kosovo Than is Widely Realized,” New York Times, November 7, 1999, p. A-6.

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⁶ Washington Post, September 19, 1999, p. A-30.