

The Balkan summit in Sarajevo: a shabby colonialist exercise

Barry Grey
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Last week's Balkan summit in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo was a fitting epilogue to the US-NATO war. As in the war itself, where the noblest humanitarian motives were used to justify a brutal and premeditated attack on a small and weak country, the clash between the rhetoric and pomp of last Friday's summit and the reality underlying it could not have been more stark.

The entire affair, promoted by its American and European organizers and advertised by the international media as a historic step on the road to peace, prosperity and democracy in the Balkans, assumed a bizarre and unreal character. The event brought together somewhere between 39 and 41 countries (media reports differed on the precise number, most settling for "around 40") in what was generally described as a "symbolic" meeting to endorse a "broadly worded" Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. The meeting lasted a mere three hours.

The participants included the heads of state of the US, Britain, Germany, France, other European countries, Canada, Japan and eight states in the region that supported the US-NATO war: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary. Also in attendance was the pro-Western president of Montenegro (even though Montenegro is the second republic, along with Serbia, of the Yugoslav Federation) and a former head of the Yugoslavian central bank who has become a prominent Serbian opponent of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. Serbia was explicitly and demonstratively excluded.

None of the major Western newspapers bothered to publish the text of the Stability Pact, if, indeed, an actual document stipulating the terms of an agreement even exists. Reuters and the *Washington Post* quoted excerpts from the communiqué issued at the end of the summit, which repeated verbatim phrases that have been uttered for the past four months to justify the war and the continued quarantine of Serbia:

"We confirm our commitment to overcome the tragedies which have afflicted south-eastern Europe during this decade... to work together toward the full achievement of the objectives of democracy, respect for human rights, economic and social development and enhanced security."

These fine words were belied by the roster of those in attendance. Milosevic was excluded ostensibly because he is an anti-democrat and "ethnic cleanser." But Turkish President Demirel, who heads one of the most repressive regimes in the world and pursues a bloody war against the Kurdish population in Turkey, was among those who signed the pact. As did Croatian head of state Tudjman, who, with US support, drove out the Serb population of Krajina in 1995 and has sought to rehabilitate the political legacy of the fascist Ustasha regime, which ruled Croatia as a German ally during World War Two and murdered hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Gypsies.

The summit was held in the shadow of escalating attacks on Serbs and Gypsies in NATO-occupied Kosovo. Just a week before, members of the Kosovo Liberation Army murdered 14 Serb farmers in Gracko, intensifying a process of intimidation and terror that has already, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, driven

164,000 Serbs from the province since the entry of NATO troops in June. While the number of Serbs "cleansed" from Kosovo is much smaller than the number of ethnic Albanians who were driven out of the province by Serb forces after the start of the NATO air war, the proportion of the pre-war Serb population that has been forced out is far higher than the proportion of the Albanian population that was expelled.

On the eve of the summit, the *New York Times* published a chilling account of the regime of corruption and terror that is being imposed on Kosovo by the KLA, with the compliance of the US and NATO. Author Chris Hedges described how the KLA has unilaterally seized government buildings and private businesses, Albanian as well as Serb, and set itself up as a political mafia.

According to Hedges, "Mr. Thaci's orders [Hashim Thaci is the US-backed KLA leader who has proclaimed himself prime minister of Kosovo] are usually delivered by small bands of sunburned young men, many of them carrying concealed pistols. The orders are handed over with warnings that a failure to comply will lead to beatings or death."

Sarajevo was chosen as the site of the summit to underscore the great strides that have supposedly been made to overcome the ravages of civil warfare following the breakup of Yugoslavia. But no amount of rhetoric could conceal the dismal reality of poverty and ethnic segregation that characterizes Bosnia four years after the end of the civil war.

Talk of democracy and ethnic tolerance in imperialist-occupied Bosnia is a travesty. The landlocked mini-state (smaller than West Virginia) is occupied by 32,000 western troops and ruled colonial-style by a Spanish diplomat, Carlos Westendorp, known as the High Representative of the International Community. The country's national anthem was chosen by Westendorp, but has no lyrics because the three co-presidents of Bosnia—a Muslim, a Croat and a Serb—have been unable to agree on the words. Westendorp also created the country's passports, currency, flag, coat of arms and license plates. The High Representative has fired 13 officials, including the hard-line nationalist elected last year as president of the Serbian enclave of Bosnia, known as the Srpska Republic.

Some 1.1 million refugees from the 1992-95 Bosnia war have never returned to their homes, and the country is rigidly divided along ethnic lines. Unemployment is epidemic and the per capita gross domestic product is \$600, less than half that of Albania, which up to now was considered the poorest country in Europe. Press reports routinely refer to rampant corruption and crime as among the country's most prominent social features.

Last Friday's summit had the eerie atmosphere of a media event staged in the midst of a ghost town. For the entire day of the meeting the populace of Sarajevo was ordered to stay off of the streets. Western "peacekeeping" troops warned that residents who went to their balconies to catch a glimpse of the dignitaries were in danger of being shot by security forces. Some 4,000 Western troops were mobilized throughout the city. Clinton's motorcade from the airport to the recently rebuilt Zetra Stadium, where the summit was held, was accompanied by hundreds of

soldiers, while helicopters hovered overhead.

Clinton's route took him past bombed out and abandoned buildings. But he told reporters that the Sarajevo summit was a "tribute to the progress that has been made." He gushed, "They've done a remarkably astonishing job in rebuilding Sarajevo." After the summit, in what was meant to symbolize US largesse and commitment to rebuild the Balkans, Clinton visited a bombed-damaged high school and delivered a few new computers to the students and staff.

The inflated rhetoric of the Western leaders seemed inversely related to the actual sums they were prepared to pledge to repair the devastation to the region resulting from the 11-week NATO air war. The European Union has set aside some \$380 million from its 1999 budget for aid to Kosovo. But at an EU summit in June the incoming EU Commission President Romano Prodi had suggested the European community might spend up to \$6 billion a year for five years on the war-ravaged province. Commenting on the scant sums being advanced by the major powers, Prodi declared archly that "the capacity for organizing war far outstrips our capacity to coordinate the reconstruction of people's shattered lives."

The Sarajevo summit itself was not billed as a venue for the announcement of specific aid packages. But Clinton went ahead and announced an American plan said to be worth \$700 million over five years to foster economic development in the Balkan countries, excluding Serbia. It seems the Americans hoped by stealing a march on their NATO allies to focus the spotlight on the US role at the summit and, more generally, assert American dominance in the region, even though the summit was sponsored by the European Union and the overall management of the Stability Pact is nominally in the hands of the EU and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Given the enormous wealth of US imperialism, and the billions of dollars in damage inflicted by American bombs and missiles, \$700 million is not a large sum. But when one examines the actual components of the aid package, it becomes clear that there is even less there than meets the eye.

A full \$350 million consists of subsidies and credits for American businesses that seek to take advantage of profit opportunities in the region. Another \$80 million is anticipated revenue losses from the proposed lifting of tariffs and duties on certain Balkan exports to the US. All but \$10 million of the rest is in the form of loans and loan guarantees. The \$10 million in cash is earmarked for US efforts to destabilize and remove the Milosevic regime in Serbia, in part through the construction of facilities for the broadcast of US propaganda into Serbia and the rest in the form of bribes and payoffs to pro-US opponents of the Belgrade regime.

The anti-Milosevic thrust of the Sarajevo summit—indeed, as far as the US was concerned, this was the main purpose of the affair—points to a critical feature of the "stability" envisioned for the Balkans by the Western powers. There is no place within it for the principle of national sovereignty, at least where it concerns small nations that find themselves at odds with the global interests of the United States. The subversion of unfriendly governments, once reserved for the secret activities of the CIA and other American intelligence agencies, is now openly pursued as a legitimate element of US foreign policy. For all the talk of democracy, the essence of the summit was an assertion of neo-colonialism within Europe.

The various regimes in the region that supported the US-NATO war were less than satisfied with the amounts indicated by the imperialist powers to compensate losses from the war and the economic fallout from the destruction of trade and transportation routes and the loss of Serbian markets.

State-controlled and private media in most Balkan countries paid scant attention to the summit. The Romanian newspaper *Curierul National* headlined its report: "Western aspirin to Balkan cancer patients."

Pro-government newspapers in Serbia summed up quite well the essence of the Sarajevo summit. The daily *Politika* said, "It is blackmail of sorts

by the powerful who do not want to pay war damages or to answer for war crimes against the civilian population of our country."

The daily *Borba* in a commentary headlined "Sarajevo farce" described the summit as a "tragicomical gathering" of Western leaders "and their Balkan bootlickers." It continued: "The summit gathered leaders of the so-called new world order, surrounded by heads of the already humiliated and ruined Balkan states and a few vassals and spies from Yugoslavia." *Borba* charged that the West's real aim was to siphon natural resources from the region.

The Serb charge of mercenary motivations behind the lofty rhetoric was confirmed by an unlikely source. The British *Economist* magazine published an article entitled "Rebuilding the Balkans: No killing to be made." The article described the developing scramble among competing national business groups to win contracts for reconstruction in Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia and other parts of the Balkans.

"European companies felt aggrieved that many of the best contracts after the 1991 Gulf War went to American firms, such as Bechtel and Brown & Root. German industry grumbled when it won few big orders in Bosnia, even though Germany had provided much of the aid.

"This time everyone is determined to get a slice of the cake. Most of the big European and American engineering groups have created special Kosovo departments, and dispatched executives to the province... 'We don't want to get the crumbs, like we did in Kuwait,' says Nigel Thompson [chairman of the British engineering industry's Balkan task force]."

The *Economist* lamented there might be scant business in Kosovo to go around, since damage to roads, bridges and power supplies was much less than first thought. But, it explained, the firms are seeking to position themselves in Kosovo for the big prize, Serbia, where war damage is estimated at \$50 billion. They are blocked, however, so long as Milosevic remains in power. As the *Economist* makes clear, frustrated business opportunities are part of the incentive for the West to bring down the current regime in Belgrade.

American business has no intention of being left behind. Clinton's economic adviser, Gene Sperling, announced in Sarajevo that Commerce Secretary William Daley would lead a trade mission of US executives to the Balkans in the fall.



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