

NATO's Credibility in Macedonia

By Robert Greenberg

In Macedonia peace remains elusive, despite the signing of a political compromise between Macedonia's ethnic Albanian and Macedonian leaders on August 13. Relations between the country's Macedonian and Albanian communities are on the verge of a complete breakdown.

What the media has termed a "peace deal" bears little resemblance to a veritable peace agreement. Rather, the agreement represents a major reform package, that would radically change the nature of the Macedonian state, which will be celebrating its 10th year of independence on September 8. Facing international political pressure and military pressure from the Albanian insurgency, government negotiators agreed to make many concessions. The agreement provides for broader participation of the Albanian minority in the police, recognition of Albanian as an official language in certain regions of the country, and sweeping constitutional changes designed to enhance the position of minority groups in the country.

The National Liberation Army became active in Macedonia in February 2001. Fighting between the NLA and Macedonian security forces escalated dramatically over the summer months. Currently, the NLA occupies dozens of villages and towns in a wide stretch of Macedonian territory bordering on Kosovo. Each time the NLA would take over a village in Macedonia, they would declare the area "liberated territory" and systematically intimidate and ethnically cleanse the Macedonian population from the region. All these actions, the NLA's leaders claimed, were undertaken in order to gain "equal rights" for Macedonia's Albanian minority, which is estimated at about 30% of the population. The rebels say they will lay down their weapons only if the Macedonian side shows good will in implementing the political agreement. For their part, the Macedonians say they

will implement the agreement only after the NLA disarms and relinquishes its territory.

NATO troops have recently entered the volatile Macedonian arena. Lord Robertson, the NATO secretary general, has vowed to disarm the NLA rebels through the 30-day long "Essential Harvest" mission. With a contingent of some 4,000, NATO has promised that it will not forcibly disarm anyone, but will collect only those weapons relinquished voluntarily. According to NATO, the rebels have approximately 2,950 assault weapons, 210 machine guns, 130 mortars and anti-tank missiles, 6 air defense systems, 2 tanks, and 2 armored personnel carriers. The Macedonian government, however, believes the Albanians have at least 85,000 weapons. This dispute over arms estimates threatens to derail the whole peace process and doom NATO's mission even before it starts.

NATO's potential for success in Macedonia is clouded by this loss of credibility with the Macedonian government. Few Macedonians have much faith in the current NATO mission. This skepticism is understandable given the role NATO in this subregion of the Balkans since 1999, when NATO launched air strikes against Yugoslavia and vowed to reverse the Serb ethnic cleansing of Albanians. Macedonia's government was a willing and eager ally for NATO at that time, opening up its territory and air space to NATO forces. Macedonia still hosts several military camps, which provide logistical support for the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR).

Macedonia has received little in return for its support of NATO. Government officials in Skopje have accused NATO of failing to protect Macedonia's northern border with Kosovo, repeatedly providing NATO with documents on the flow of arms and Albanian militants from Kosovo. NATO has countered that the

protection of the Macedonian border with Kosovo is not part of the alliance's mandate in Kosovo. Nevertheless, NATO maintains that it has beefed up patrols along the Kosovo-Macedonia border. But NATO, which has a massive presence in Kosovo, contends that it is virtually impossible to prevent infiltration of the border, given the area's rugged terrain.

NATO now promises to collect the same weapons that it let slip through from Kosovo into Macedonia. The cynics would argue that it is in NATO's best interest to under-report the number of Albanian arms in Macedonia. After all, admitting the possibility that as many as 85,000 arms have been smuggled into Macedonia would further damage NATO's reputation and credibility.

The NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) had promised to disarm the former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). But weapons seem to flow freely into Macedonia. Ex-KLA members and members of its successor force, the Kosovo Protection

Corps, have been placed on President Bush's "black list" of individuals, who have fomented and supported the rebel movement in Macedonia. All analysts agree that Kosovo continues to be a major arms conduit. Peace and stability in the Balkans cannot be achieved if paramilitary forces and illegal weapons are tolerated—either in Kosovo or in Macedonia.

NATO can still salvage its Essential Harvest operation in Macedonia. To do so, NATO must declare its complete support for the legitimate political leaders in Macedonia and their bold efforts to achieve a compromise agreement. In its dealings with Macedonia, NATO should treat the country as it would treat its own member-nations. Macedonia has long expressed its desire to be integrated into NATO, and has proven to be a true NATO ally. NATO now has the opportunity to bring stability to Macedonia, if it extends its Essential Harvest mission until it can be absolutely certain that the peace process is irreversible in Macedonia and that all sides will live up to their commitments.

NATO should deploy its forces along Macedonia's border with Kosovo and Albania, and guarantee the territorial integrity of Macedonia for at least 12 months. Such a preventive measure would help secure a ceasefire and avert a disastrous civil war. The alternative to the presence of a fully engaged NATO is bleak. If NATO would withdraw without guaranteeing a peaceful resolution, fighting could easily break out again. If NATO does not take its peacekeeping role seriously now, it will likely need to return to Macedonia with more troops in the not-to-distant future. Concerted action is needed now to prevent yet another region in the Balkans from being traumatized by an appalling ethnic war.

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