Macedonia

By Fred Abrahams, April 1, 1998

Key Points

- Externally, Macedonia is plagued both by hostility from Greece and Bulgaria and by mounting turmoil in Kosovo. Internally, ethnic tensions arise from discrimination against an Albanian minority.
- A proactive UN peacekeeping force, established in 1992 to create a buffer region, will be withdrawn in August 1998, unless extended.
- Macedonia has helped stabilize the turbulent southern Balkans, but Macedonia's own stability depends on establishing the rule of law and respect for minority rights.

Small and relatively unknown, Macedonia (officially called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or FYROM) is the key to stability in the southern Balkans. At the heart of traditional trade routes, north-south and east-west, Macedonia has been the starting point of two Balkan wars this century. It is surrounded by unfriendly states, each with territorial ambitions and overlapping ethnic minorities. A conflict in Macedonia stands to ignite the region, drawing in Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey, the latter two both members of NATO.

Established in 1991, Macedonia was the only republic of the former Yugoslavia to gain its independence without bloodshed. But from the beginning, Macedonia faced the daunting tasks of building a state, reforming from communism, and gaining recognition from the world. The Social Democratic Party (formerly the Communist Party) won the largest number of parliamentary seats in 1994 elections (not without complaints of fraud by the opposition) and formed a coalition with a smaller ethnic Macedonian party and a party of ethnic Albanians. Bulgaria, Macedonia's neighbor to the east, accepted the state but not the people, because, according to the government in Sofia, ethnic Macedonians are Bulgarians. Greece imposed an embargo on the landlocked country from April 1994 to October 1995 and temporarily blocked its membership in international organizations, because it claimed that the name Macedonia implied territorial claims on the Greek region with the same name (thus the formulation FYROM). Together with UN sanctions (in place at the time against rump Yugoslavia—Federal Republic of Yugoslavia —because of the war in Bosnia), the embargo cost Macedonia an estimated $1 billion.

To the north of Macedonia is rump Yugoslavia (composed of Serbia and Montenegro), which has disputed a narrow stretch of the common border. To the northwest is Kosovo (the predominantly ethnic Albanian region in Serbia), where Serbian police are brutally cracking down on an increasingly violent ethnic Albanian separatist movement. Fighting in Kosovo threatens to ignite a wider conflict that would directly affect Macedonia with its substantial Albanian population.

The greatest threat to Macedonia's stability is the fragile interethnic potpourri within the country. Ethnic Albanians, Turks, Roma, and Serbs, among others,

all live together with an ethnic Macedonian majority. Ethnic Albanians (23 percent of the population, according to official statistics) suffer some state discrimination, especially in government employment and education, and have tense relations with both the government and the country's ethnic Macedonian citizens (who constitute 66 percent of the population, according to the government).

In response to these internal and external threats, the United Nations deployed its first-ever preventive deployment force, known as UNPREDEP, in 1992 with a mission to monitor the borders and prevent a southward spread of the war. The UN goal was to protect the "territorial integrity and stability" of Macedonia, i.e. to contain the war and establish the country as a buffer state between competing interests in the region. The mission's mandate is scheduled to expire on August 31, 1998; but, after the recent violence in neighboring Kosovo, both the UN and U.S. have stated that the international troops will stay, although it is not yet clear how many will remain and under whose mandate.

Washington supports the UN force and currently contributes 350 U.S. soldiers. It has also bolstered the Macedonian government, which it views as a constructive force in a sensitive region. Although the Macedonian government has taken some steps toward both economic and political reform and better relations with its neighbors, the U.S. and other Western states have chosen to ignore ongoing problems with corruption, human rights abuses, and the use of violence—not to mention the government's questionable commitment to multiethnic coexistence. Local and international human rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have reported on the growing problem of police brutality and politicized courts.

Critics of U.S. policy do not suggest that the international community should spurn the current government; but that it should pressure Macedonian authorities to democratize. The Macedonian government may be an important ally for its constructive role in the southern Balkans, but long-term stability can only be achieved by establishing the rule of law and respect for human rights—especially minority rights.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Key Problems

- U.S. exhortations for ethnic tolerance in Macedonia are undermined by a failure to condition aid to improved human rights.
- Provocative actions by Albanian nationalists within Macedonia have triggered brutal overreactions by U.S.-trained Macedonian policemen.
- As a reward for Macedonian compliance with U.S. designs, Washington is helping Macedonia build a modern, pro-Western, NATO-linked defense force to deter any cross-border spread of the violence in Kosovo without simultaneously requiring democratic reforms.

The U.S. recognizes Macedonia as the key to stability in the southern Balkans, and Washington has been the driving force behind the international effort to protect Macedonia's territorial integrity. Currently, 350 U.S. soldiers participate in UNPREDEP, and at least $76 million has been provided in foreign aid since diplomatic relations were established in 1995. Macedonia is a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace (created in 1994—largely at U.S. initiative—as an interim structure to an expanded NATO and comprised of 27 nations, including former Warsaw Pact members) and has participated in numerous joint training exercises. U.S. Ambassador Chris Hill—previously the chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Albania (1991-93) and a member of the Bosnia Peace Negotiating Team that brokered the Dayton Agreement—plays an important role in Macedonia's political life.

The U.S. has repeatedly stressed the importance of constructing a multiethnic society in Macedonia built on the rule of law, and some U.S.-funded projects have pursued that goal. But such high-minded exhortations have not been consistently buttressed by U.S. policy. Human rights violations by the

Macedonian government have never resulted in reduced or conditioned aid, and they have rarely provoked any public criticism either from the U.S. government or from other international organizations active in the country, such as the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Any mention of human rights violations is always accompanied by a description of the difficult economic and political conditions that the Macedonian government is facing, and ethnic Albanians are generally urged to avoid radical approaches like the creation of parallel structures or ethnically based federalism.

The U.S. is helping Macedonia to build a modern, pro-Western defense force with close links to NATO. Washington's main concerns are the unresolved border dispute between Yugoslavia and Macedonia, the risk of civil unrest in Kosovo spreading across the border, and the military imbalance between Macedonia and its neighbors in the region. In 1998, the U.S. is providing $7.9 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and $400,000 through the International Military Education Training program (IMET). Macedonia will also be eligible in 1998 to receive grants of Excess Defense Articles (EDA), which provide equipment such as vehicles, office machines, and medical supplies. In return, the Macedonian government has offered the U.S. military and NATO forces use of its sizable Krivolak training grounds.

The U.S. has also trained at least 350 Macedonian policemen since 1995, including a group of special forces. Some of these policemen were deployed in the western city of Gostivar on July 9, 1997, when the police dispersed a violent demonstration of ethnic Albanians. Direct clashes left three protesters dead and at least two hundred people injured, including nine policemen. Once the police established control, they beat demonstrators who were offering no resistance, including some people whom the police had tied to trees and traffic signs. At the local police station, detainees were forced to pass through a gauntlet of baton-wielding policemen. The U.S. training of police is continuing in 1998.

The Support for East European Democracy program (SEED) will have provided $46 million by the end of 1998 for a wide range of projects, ranging from the rule of law to privatization. According to congressional testimony, the 1998 SEED programs in Macedonia will focus on legal system development, private sector enterprise development, and support for citizen groups.In March 1998, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott visited Macedonia to demonstrate U.S. support for the country and its government in light of the crisis in Kosovo. Concerned about the conflict spreading to Macedonia, he presented Washington's Action Plan for Southeast Europe, a NATO-linked effort to promote reform and regional cooperation among Macedonia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Albania.

In general, U.S. policy in Macedonia has been to lend financial and political support to a government that it views as a cooperative ally in the region. In Washington's eyes, Macedonia has played a constructive role by accommodating the United States and by promoting better relations with its neighbors and with NATO. Yet, as it did in Albania, the U.S. is ignoring some of the problems that exist within Macedonia. In the name of regional stability, Washington and the rest of the international community have turned a blind eye to the absence of democratic institutions, mounting interethnic tension, police abuse, politicized courts, and growing corruption.

In its defense, the Macedonian government must walk a political tightrope between nationalist Macedonian forces on the one side and nationalist Albanian parties on the other. These groups have sometimes taken pro-vocative actions, such as raising the Albanian state flag in front of town halls where ethnic Albanians control the local government. The international community clearly fears potential chaos and sees the Macedonian government as the best option for securing peace.

But unqualified support is both shortsighted and counterproductive. Even if

the current government is the best available option, there is no reason not to hold it more accountable for its actions. If the Macedonian government wants Western support—economic, political, and military—then it should be encouraged to respect at least the most basic legal obligations of an internationally recognized state.

Toward a New Foreign Policy

Key Recommendations

- U.S. policy should support the consolidation of democratic institutions within Macedonia, such as independent courts, depoliticized police, a free press, and a system of minority rights protections.
- Human rights abuses such as the police violence in Gostiva should be roundly condemned.
- An international presence both to monitor and to cultivate democratization and human rights in Macedonia is essential to any long-term UN or NATO-led peacekeeping effort.

U.S. policy should support the consolidation of democratic institutions within Macedonia, such as independent courts, depoliticized police, a free press, and a system of minority rights protections. Macedonia's long-term stability and security—rather than the existence of a particular government—is best served by implementing the rule of law and respecting the rights of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity.

In policy terms, this requires a commitment from the United States and the international community to help the Macedonian government implement human rights standards and to hold it accountable when it does not. Emphasis should be on promoting the rule of law, interethnic relations, and parliamentary reforms, as well as economic restructuring.

Foreign aid should be linked to the government's respect for human rights. Some international accords, such as the Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and Macedonia, consider human rights to be an essential element of the agreement. One incentive prodding the Macedonian government into respecting human rights is its desire for membership in the European Union.

The U.S. should also be seeking, in every way possible, to enhance civil society, an independent judiciary, and a responsible press. These institutions cannot be created overnight, but the transformation of eastern Europe has spawned an entire industry (part public, part private) devoted to nurturing civil society in fragile new states. That industry should turn its full attention to Macedonia.

Most importantly, the U.S. should condemn human rights abuses when they occur. The extreme violence by the police against demonstrators in Gostivar rated a mere entry in the U.S. State Department's annual human rights report and a bland statement calling on all sides to "address their concerns through peaceful, democratic means." Otherwise, no U.S. officials have publicly condemned the brutal police actions or the highly politicized trials of ethnic Albanians that followed, sending a message that the U.S. will tolerate abusive behavior by the Macedonian government. Washington should express clear disapproval when the Macedonian government violates the rights of its citizens, foments ethnic trouble, or harasses the political opposition to deflect attention from domestic problems.

Human rights concerns should also be a fundamental aspect of any future peacekeeping force. Whether UNPREDEP is replaced by another UN mission or by NATO troops (as is currently being discussed), it is critical that the civilian component of the mission be not only maintained but strengthened. An international presence both to monitor and to cultivate democratization and human rights inside Macedonia is essential to preserving long-term peace.

A decision to discontinue this civilian component of peacekeeping would be a sign to the Macedonian government that the international community does not take internal democratization seriously. Effective, long-term peacekeeping must involve more than foreign soldiers on the border to contain external threats. It must consider the serious threats to Macedonia's stability that are at play inside the country—namely, interethnic tension and the country's fragile democratic infrastructure.

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