

## OPINIONS

Will U.N., U.S. fight  
way out of Bosnia?

By James D. Flori

Now that the possibility of a U.N. withdrawal from Bosnia appears real, military planners speculate that U.N. troops may have to fight their way out with help from the United States.

Western powers have a variety of interests in the former Yugoslavia: minimizing death and suffering, preventing the war from spreading south, promoting a stable postwar equilibrium, avoiding a row with Russia, and so on. But the most important objective is to protect the cohesion of NATO.

Isolationists can say what they like about NATO, but it is probably the most valuable asset from 45 years of Cold War. The fact that the British and French have troops on the ground in Bosnia while the Americans do not has given the allies divergent views. The United States wants to lift the arms embargo and strike the Serbs from the air, but the British and French do not, because they are subject to retaliation. This has created tension within the alliance.

The Bosnian people have better things to worry about than a schism within NATO, but the United States and its allies do not.

There is probably only one thing that could conceivably energize the U.N. as a fighting force. If the ground forces must fight their way to the sea to make it onto U.S. ships, then the paper tiger will acquire a whole new attitude. The British and French, who do not want to fight against the Serbs in an attack mode, would certainly fight if the object was to get their own people out in one piece.

In such a situation, the NATO allies would suddenly be reading off the same page, and the rift in the alliance would slam shut with a clap. Because the struggle would be primarily against the Serbs, the price for healing the alliance would be a chill in relations between the West and Russia. On balance, however, that seems to be an acceptable trade.

The Serbs have proven their willingness to fire on the U.N. and to use hostages as human shields. The

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U.N. ace-in-the-hole is NATO air power, against which the Serbs have only two defenses: bad weather and human shields. Therefore, if a U.N. withdrawal turns violent, hostage taking is likely to increase.

In addition, there could be some Machiavellian provocation going on. If someone wants to get the U.N. and NATO to finally use force against the Serbs, the way to do it is to get the Serbs to attack the U.N. as it tries to get out. The Muslims have an incentive to do exactly that.

This is a genocidal war, and the Muslims are getting bashed. Withdrawal may make them desperate. They may attack the Serbs and then try to get the U.N. caught in the crossfire and blame the Serbs.

The Republicans who control Congress have been more hawkish on Bosnia than President Clinton. Like Margaret Thatcher, Bob Dole has urged U.N. withdrawal for the very purpose of freeing NATO to strike hard at Serbia. If the withdrawal is bloody, there will be more sympathy for that view. And if the Muslims are shrewd enough to aid us in an escape under fire, we would owe them. We would be in a position to lift the arms embargo and to use air power freely without destroying NATO.

An alliance is more than a treaty. What NATO needed after the demise of the Soviet Union was a renewed sense of purpose. What it got instead was a divisive quagmire in the Balkans. NATO and the U.N. will survive Bosnia no matter what happens, but if there is a trial by fire, both institutions will emerge stronger.

The two largest and most important security organizations in the world have a common problem. Neither is willing to fight. The irony is that it could be the very act of withdrawal from their joint failures in Bosnia which finally forces them both to pull the trigger.

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