

Rambouillet, Ohio

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Almost all the details at the Kosovo talks are decided, and the key decisions are clear: independence is out, NATO is in, and Milosevic stays on top.

International mediators called it "an important first step" when Serbian and Albanian negotiators arrived in Rambouillet, France, this weekend for discussions on the future status of Kosovo. In fact, many of the important decisions had already been made: independence is out, NATO is in, and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic stays atop it all.

On the first day, the Contact Group on the Balkans sponsoring the negotiations--the US, Russia, UK, France, Germany and Italy--presented a draft agreement that lays out the constitutional and security arrangements for an autonomous Kosovo inside Serbia, with a promise to revisit Kosovo's status after three years. NATO is expected to send at least 30,000 ground troops as soon as it is signed. A spokesperson for the Contact Group referred to the "guiding principles" of the agreement, with details to be negotiated by the delegates, and diplomats estimate that 85 per cent of the agreement is non-negotiable. Key potential deal-breakers remain, such as the Albanian demand for a referendum in three years and the Serbian demand for a formal recognition of the existing borders of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Yet the international mediators, at least, appear confident that a deal will be reached.

French President Jacques Chirac opened the proceedings at the elegant chateau by challenging the two delegations to "choose life." They listened solemnly from different parts of the room, ignoring the presence of the other side. There were no handshakes or photo-ops which could potentially be seen as compromising by either group's constituency back home.

Instead, both sides retreated to their respective work spaces, one above the other, to hammer out the few remaining details of an interim agreement that, international mediators claim, will restore "substantial autonomy" to Kosovo without offering independence.

The actual degree of Kosovo's autonomy under the agreement is a question for debate, despite claims by the Contact Group that it would meet the level Kosovo enjoyed under the 1974 Yugoslav constitution. Under the old constitution, Kosovo enjoyed a degree of economic autonomy. According to drafts in circulation, the federal government would maintain firm control over Kosovo's monetary policy, and the province would probably be unable to secure independent loans from international financial institutions.

In addition, the political system proposed in the draft is a "recipe for gridlock," said the Albanian delegation's legal advisor, Paul Williams, an American lawyer who advised the Bosnian government at Dayton. According to the draft, the president of Kosovo and the president of Kosovo's parliament must be from different ethnic groups. Assuming that an Albanian was president of Kosovo, then a Serbian president of parliament could influence the legislative process, Williams said.

Another provision in the draft allows any national group in the parliament (Turks, Roma, Albanians, Serbs and others) to block any parliamentary decision that they believe is against their national group's "vital interest." The term is not defined in the draft, and there is no clear procedure to devise a solution when such objections are raised.

The fundamental issues, however, come down to two points: Kosovo's status and the future security arrangement of the province.

The former is the main concern of the Serbs, who demand that Kosovo remain a part of Serbia. The latter is the most important issue at the negotiations for the Albanians, who want NATO troops in Kosovo, including Americans. Albanians are pushing for a formal cease-fire, that would be backed by bringing NATO directly into the deal as a signatory on any agreement.

Within this framework, deals can be made so that all sides claim victory. Milosevic, not present at the talks, may accept NATO troops in Kosovo, a withdrawal of his forces, and autonomy for the region--if Kosovo independence is off the table. He can tell the Serbian public that he, once again, defied the international community, which is trying to tear Yugoslavia apart, and at the same time stuck NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) with the burdensome price tag of policing the region.

The Albanians, including the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), may defer their demand for independence if NATO troops enter Kosovo and the Serbian police withdraw. They are pushing for a referendum on Kosovo's status after three years, but will probably settle--or be forced to settle--for a more vague "revisiting" of the issue under the auspices of the international community.

In the meantime, Kosovo would largely be an international protectorate policed by NATO and administered by the OSCE. Politically flawed, and weak on the arrest of war criminals, the agreement would stop the fighting for the time being. Both sides are expected to sign.

Until that "great victory for European diplomacy," as the French government is likely to call it, the two delegations will be locked up in Rambouillet to hammer out the details. These include whether Kosovo's national groups must be larger than 5 per cent to have automatic representation in the parliament. (Milosevic claims that Kosovo has a sizeable number of Egyptians and a little-known community of Goran.) The two sides sleep and work in separate areas, as their international interlocutors wear out the carpet between them. US Ambassador Christopher Hill, leading a mid-level US delegation, is firmly in control of the negotiations, with close consultation with his mentor from Dayton, Richard Holbrooke.

The Albanian, Serbian and international press are outside the chateau's walls, scrounging for scraps of information that fall off the negotiating table. Sparse and poorly organised press briefings by the organisers offer little insight about the talks.

If the talks are successful, another conflict will have been contained in time for NATO's 50th anniversary this April. But whether such an agreement will lead to a long-term resolution of the Kosovo conflict remains to be seen.

Whatever the result, it is certain that the position of Milosevic - Serbia's "father," "saviour," and undisputed leader - will be enhanced. Once again, he will emerge as the "factor of stability", possibly this time extracting an end to the "outer wall of sanctions" which have been in place since Bosnia. And as after his agreement with Holbrooke over Kosovo in October 1998, Milosevic is likely, in the event of any deal, to embark on a further crackdown on the few remaining domestic elements outside of his control: bad news for students, independent media, non-governmental organisations and everyone else concerned with long-term stability in the region.

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