

Round One: To Milosevic

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The regime is having a very successful war, and in a few days, NATO will face a hard choice: deploy ground troops with considerable risk of casualties, or return to the negotiating table to face a even stronger Milosevic.

NATO may have predicted that the immediate consequence of its bombing campaign against Serbia would be a rapid deterioration of the situation on the ground in Kosovo, and this has occurred. But Western officials have been surprised by their inability to reduce Slobodan Milosevic's capacity to destabilise the region, and in particular to compel him to accept a peace accord and NATO peacekeepers.

After six days of continuing missile attacks and air strikes, it seems that the Yugoslav military and police are in surprisingly good shape. NATO has hit most of its designated targets: eight military airports and dozens of radar sites, barracks, storage and other facilities have been blown up or badly damaged. But the military and police communications, command chains, and human resources have remained untouched.

The same goes for most of the surface-to-air missiles and flak system, which the Yugoslav Army cleverly refrained from engaging during the raids, thus making them invisible to NATO electronic detectors. NATO now says that it is bringing in tactical fighters and targeting artillery and tanks in southern Serbia and Kosovo. But for the moment, bad weather is still forcing the allies to keep flying well above 10,000 feet, too high to aim at moving targets. The ground offensive by Serbian troops in Kosovo can thus continue for several more days at least, whatever NATO's efforts.

In fact, Milosevic's forces have already achieved most of their goals: with frightening speed they crushed the resistance of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the northern part of Kosovo, sending a wave of refugees south. They have secured 10-kilometre-wide buffer zones along the borders with Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro -- blocking possible entry paths for KLA reinforcements and supplies, and presenting an obstacle to an eventual attempt by NATO to force its way in.

It remains unclear how NATO intends to cope with this situation: basic military theory says it is impossible to force an army to retreat by air attacks alone, regardless of the number of bombs and missiles used. This means that intensifying the bombing campaign south of the 44th parallel, which NATO announced on Monday, is unlikely to yield any fruit. It also means that NATO will have to reconsider its strategy, and more importantly, its policy. The problem is that correcting a mistake also means acknowledging that a mistake was made--a risk few policy makers are ready to take.

On the home front, Milosevic has gained tremendous support, even among his most ardent critics. After the first air raid alert was sounded, most Serbs immediately adopted the slogan "my country, right or wrong." All of their frustrations about life in Yugoslavia were transferred towards the West. On Sunday, March 28, tens of thousands of young Belgraders assembled at the central square to attend a rock concert organised in defiance of the raids. For a moment, it looked as if Belgrade slipped back in time--the bands, as well as the faces in the crowd, were much the same as two years ago. Then, they were calling for the resignation of Slobodan Milosevic; this time, the target of their dissent was NATO and the Western leaders who ordered the strikes.

Couple all this with the successful downing of an American F-117 west of Belgrade, which also boosted morale, and the conclusion is that Milosevic is better off than he ever was -- and getting more so with each day of the campaign. NATO will continue to bomb for a few more days. But then it will face a hard choice: deploy ground troops with considerable risk of casualties, or return to the negotiating table to face an even stronger Milosevic.

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