

## **Is US Balkans Policy Set to Change?**

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Western analysts are divided over whether US interest in former Yugoslavia will wane following the appalling terrorist attack on America.

Although the smoke and dust over Manhattan and Washington has cleared, the political fallout from last week's attack on the United States continues to shroud the world. With this as true for the Balkans as anywhere else, Western analysts have been busy trying to discern what the long-term effects of the tragedy will be for the region.

The basic question is whether the attacks will result in a rapid US loss of interest in the Balkans followed by a draw down in troop numbers. If that happens will Europe, or more precisely the countries of the European Union, be willing and able to take up the slack?

Returning from Monday's meeting of the Contact Group in Berlin, which had been convened to discuss the situation in Macedonia, one Western diplomat said simply that it was "still far too early to tell" what the long-term effect of the bombing would be. However, he told IWPR that he believed that, in the short-term, the region could expect two immediate results.

The first would be that the US and other Western countries would demand a security clampdown on any foreign Islamic fundamentalists lingering in the Balkans. "They'll give the Bosnian government hell...or anyone else with any Mujahedin swanning around," he said.

Right on cue the Albanian government has announced that it is carrying out checks on Arabs currently residing in the country. In 1998, the Albanian authorities, working with US intelligence, foiled a plot by alleged associates of Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden to blow up the American embassy in Tirana. The Sarajevo government has also been embarrassed by claims that in the darkest days of the Bosnian war it had contacts with bin Laden and his network.

The second short-term effect of the bombings will be that top level Western politicians will no longer have the time or energy to lavish on trips to places such as Macedonia to persuade local politicians to follow one course or another. Indeed, various political manoeuvres designed to score points are less likely to be met with a ministerial visit but a short, sharp phone call. And, says IWPR's source, "When they ring up they'll be more impatient and expect people to behave themselves."

As to the long-term question of Western involvement in the Balkans, analysts are dividing into two camps. On the one hand, there are those who believe that we can expect a radical change in US policy. On the other, there are those who think that American policymakers will conclude that it will remain in Washington's interests to stay engaged on the ground.

Daniel Serwer, director of the Balkans Initiative at the United States Institute of Peace, is amongst those who believe that we will soon see a major change in US policy. "There'll be a massive shift to 'homeland defence'," he said. This means pouring resources into defending the US from the threat of chemical, biological and missile attacks and now, of course, terrorism as well.

Serwer, who has always been in favour of an active US role in the Balkans, says that persuading Washington to become involved in the region has always been difficult, "because the US doesn't care about the Balkans. If it does, it is only because of its relations with the Europeans.

"Recently the Bush administration was headed towards committing to finishing the job and finishing it right. Now there will be a lot of pressure to draw down and there will be less diplomatic pressure."

Gloomily, he noted, "When the administration says we are at war it means something. It means marshalling everything: military, diplomatic and economic means. The argument will be that we need everything available. Everything else will take second place and the EU will have to take up the slack."

John Hulsman, an analyst at Washington's Heritage Foundation, which is close to the Bush administration, said it was ironic that Daniel Serwer favours US Balkans involvement but now believes it will be phased out, while he is against involvement but believes that the result of the attacks will be precisely the opposite. "When confronted the US does not stick its head in the sand, it stays more engaged than before. People will say we have to be engaged."

Karin von Hippel, an American who was formerly a senior member of staff at UNMIK in Pristina, and is now at the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College, London, says the fate of the Balkans, or at least US involvement there, now hangs on the outcome of the current debate over US foreign policy following the terrorist attacks. This will depend on whether President Bush ultimately decides to incline towards the more hawkish arguments of Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld or those of Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"Rumsfeld is more interested in getting out and Powell is likely to want to engage more, " she said. " He says 'you ignore the world at your peril' and will want to maintain strong links with the allies and not antagonise them. In fact these have been the two main approaches since the administration got underway.

"Whoever wins this debate will win everything else too - determining our involvement in peacekeeping and whether we adopt a proactive or retrenched foreign policy. Anyway peacekeeping is not going to be a priority for a while."

Nicholas Whyte, a veteran Balkan analyst, now with the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels, says he believes that the attacks will have a limited influence on US policy since Washington was already beginning to draw down its presence in the Balkans.

"This reinforces arguments in favour of a European peacekeeping capability," he said. "Here you have a situation where America has other priorities...the Balkans are in Europe not in America.

"There are already fewer and fewer US troops in Bosnia. The American contribution to Kosovo will gradually be phased out. The number of US troops in the Balkans in five years will be a lot less than it is now."

Whyte's fear is that the US pulls out of the Balkans, "before the Europeans are ready," although he suspects this won't happen.

Today the EU's own peacekeeping and rapid reaction capability remains more on the drawing board than in the realms of reality, but, assuming political and financial hurdles can be overcome, there is no reason to believe that it might not become a credible military force.

It's questionable, however, whether the EU will ever have the political clout that the US has wielded in the Balkans over the last few years.

Whyte believes that this problem can be overcome with US endorsements of one form or another, noting that the current NATO force in Macedonia only has logistics support from the US military.

As of now we can only wait and see how US and hence European policy towards the Balkans evolves, but in the coming weeks and months, few analysts believe that any of the major players, especially in Macedonia, will risk causing problems.

Western intelligence experts believe that following the conflicts in Kosovo, southern Serbia and Macedonia, there are now a hardcore of some 10,000 ethnic Albanian men with significant military experience. With so many Western troops on the ground, and with so much more potential for conflict, whatever the US decides to do will be crucial, not just for the Balkans but also for the debate about the ultimate future shape of Europe's own defence forces.

Tim Judah is the author of *Kosovo: War and Revenge* and *The Serbs: History, Myth and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, both published by Yale University Press.

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