

## **Washington Dithers Over Macedonia**

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US reluctance to get involved in Macedonia could undermine peace prospects.

The sense of mystification in Washington about what Bush policy on Macedonia actually entails was only increased when the administration reluctantly bowed to the inevitable. The US government said last week that American troops would participate in a NATO force that collects weapons from ethnic Albanian fighters, if there is a settlement of their conflict with the Skopje authorities.

Until now, insofar as there had been a policy, it was to hope that US mediator James Pardew pulled off a deal that cut the risk of involvement of US forces, and the consequent risk of casualties, to as close to zero as possible. "We have a plan that will be implemented once there is final agreement among the parties on a political settlement," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

The collection of weapons from Albanian guerrillas is likely to be part of any accord. "We'll come in and do what we need to do," he said.

The decision came after a speech by the House Democratic leader, Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri, in which he criticised the Bush administration's foreign policy on the grounds that "the administration has resisted a commitment of even a small number of ground troops to this mission".

Gephardt, who met with allied leaders in Europe, said Lord Robertson, the NATO secretary-general, had told him an American presence would reinforce the US commitment to NATO and send a signal to the warring factions that a military solution to the crisis is impossible.

US policy-makers appear to have finally realised that no troops equals no deal. James Hooper, managing director of the Washington-based Public, International Law and Policy Group was scathing about US policy before last week's announcement.

The Bush administration "sees Macedonia as a third rate country, and they are attempting a second rate solution by sending a diplomat instead of a senior political figure," he said. "Pardew is a first rate diplomat, but he does not have the clout that a senior political figure would have."

On ideological grounds, in line with its isolationist approach, the new administration has set itself against special envoys. But then it has, until now, also set itself against the commitment of troops to areas like Macedonia.

It is not so much that the GIs are especially efficient or good peace-keepers - it is the symbolism. They would be a token of American interest and commitment, and in their absence all the parties infer the worst - that no GIs means no interest inside Washington.

There is, of course, a US commitment to the territorial integrity and survival of Macedonia. This is based not on any particular sentiment, but simply an acknowledgement that a conflict in Macedonia would destabilise the whole region. Between Greece, Turkey, Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania there is more than enough combustible material to set the region on fire, and Macedonia - over which several of these countries stake historic claims - could be the spark.

Washington recognised the danger signs in the early years of the Balkan crisis when it put troops on the Macedonian border as part of a UN conflict prevention force. This deployment took place even while Washington refused, for several years, to deploy forces further north in Bosnia.

That reluctance to get involved militarily has characterised US policy almost from the beginning of the Balkan conflicts. It has the effect of making American policy reactive. It is only when disaster threatens and the fuse is burning close to the gunpowder barrels that the US overcomes its inhibitions.

Somehow, the administration hoped that even a diplomatically disarmed Pardew could extinguish the fuse. The fervent hope that this time negotiations may work has led the administration to be very low key, and to go as slowly as the diplomatic traffic can bear.

Assisting this approach is the obscurity of the issue for most of the people on Capitol Hill. Most legislators have seen no great burning issues for themselves or their constituents.

The Albanian lobby is vociferous but small. The Macedonians in the US are more culturally than politically oriented.

Behind the scenes, however, officials have been working on various scenarios, and they are reportedly increasingly vexed by the threat to an agreement posed by Macedonian nationalists such as Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski.

One thing that almost everyone in Washington is agreed on is to dismiss conspiracy theories coming from the region. The reluctance of US troops to go aggressively after armed NLA troops on the border is more likely to derive from commanders' reluctance to risk casualties than from any devious CIA plot to back their "Albanian friends".

Yet there is little evidence that the current US administration realises that it is taking the same type of calculated risk that the Bush and Clinton administrations took when they sat on the sidelines in the early days of the Bosnia war. And it looks very much like this is a bet against local realities it may lose.

As Hooper concludes, "There will be an agreement, but it will not be implemented, and the nationalists in the Macedonian parliament will probably vote against it anyway. If the US stands on the sidelines, we risk a gradually evolving partition, hopefully non-violent. But look at Bosnia."

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**Location:** Macedonia

Albania

Turkey

Serbia

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