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A Peace Agreement That's Bound to Fail

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The Clinton Administration claims that it has made progress toward bringing peace to Kosovo. Don't believe it. The deal arranged by Richard Holbrooke is likely to fail sooner rather than later.

The Clinton team wants to end the fighting between ethnic Albanians and Serbs through a settlement that leaves Kosovo as a province within Serbia. It fears that any deal allowing Kosovo its independence would encourage ethnic separatism in Bosnia and Macedonia, two multi-ethnic states that the Administration is struggling to hold together.

In this the Yugoslavian President, Slobodan Milosevic, shares American aims. Kosovo is not like Bosnia, which Mr. Milosevic tried to tear apart. Where the United States and Mr. Milosevic part company, of course, is that the Serb leader believes that the solution is using police and army troops to crack down on ethnic Albanians, who make up 90 percent of Kosovo's population.

Mr. Holbrooke's deal, which is more a loose agreement than a coherent plan, would have the Serbs cease all military and police operations in Kosovo and send home all the Serbian forces that have moved into the province over the past seven months. Any troops left in Kosovo would be made to return to their barracks.

The agreement also seeks to give the Albanians limited autonomy. Specifically, it calls for new elections within nine months for Kosovo's parliament and executive, and for creating a police force that reflects Kosovo's ethnic composition. Some 2,000 civilian monitors would be put on the ground for at least one year to monitor Serbian compliance. The threat of NATO air strikes would be held over the Serbs.

This deal is doomed, however, because neither the Albanians nor the Serbs are likely to stick to it. Friday's extending of the deadline for Serbia to comply with its troop withdrawals is a sign of things to come.

There is near-unanimous agreement among Kosovo's Albanians that full independence is the only acceptable outcome. Even the moderate Ibrahim Rugova, the most influential Albanian leader and an advocate of nonviolence, says adamantly that autonomy within Serbia isn't enough. Albanians might be amenable to delaying a final decision on Kosovo's status for three years if they receive significant autonomy in the meantime, as

the Clinton Administration proposes. But when the time is up they will insist on independence and fight to achieve it.

In Mr. Milosevic's eyes, any degree of autonomy for Kosovo will only aid the Albanian push for independence. Ethnic Serbs have been leaving Kosovo for decades, mainly because job opportunities are poor. In 1961, 227,000 Serbs lived in Kosovo; the number today is about 180,000.

With autonomy, the situation for Kosovo's Serbs would rapidly go from bad to worse. If Albanians controlled Kosovo's main institutions, they would make life very unpleasant for the Serbs.

The Albanian authorities would find ways to move Serbs out of government jobs and to shut down Serbian-owned enterprises. Serbs would lose control of the educational system, and classes would soon be taught only in Albanian. Because Albanians would control the police, Serbs would have little protection from ethnic violence. Militant Albanian separatists would have easy access to arms from neighboring Albania and would surely renew their drive to push the Serbs out.

Faced with a bleak economic future and the threat of violence, ethnic Serbs would probably flee even faster, just as they left Sarajevo after it was placed under Bosnian Muslim control in 1995. Autonomy for Kosovo, in short, would mean that the local population would become almost 100 percent Albanian.

Mr. Milosevic is unlikely to let the situation reach that point. Instead he is likely to make excuses not to hold elections and to delay changes in the police force, while moving Serbian military forces across the border. Open conflict with the Albanians would be likely to follow, and we would be back at square one. Only this time NATO would find it harder to threaten air strikes, because Mr. Milosevic could take the 2,000 civilian monitors hostage.

There is no good solution for the United States to support, but the least bad option is to convince both sides that the best thing for them is a real partition separating Kosovo from Serbia. Selling independence to the ethnic Albanians is a no-brainer. And although it may seem far-fetched, there are convincing reasons for the Serbs to let Kosovo go.

Kosovo is an important cultural and historical symbol for the Serbs; it was the center of their medieval empire. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that Serbia might part with the region if the right incentives were provided. Again, demography is the key. Given the imposing disparity in birthrates between Albanians and Serbs (today, 16 Albanian children are born for every Serb baby), the population of Kosovo will continue to shift against the Serbs. Moreover, as the head of the nationalist Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts recently pointed out, Serbs will be a minority in Serbia itself by 2020 if Kosovo remains within its borders.

With numbers like that, Serbia won't be a Serbian nation-state anymore. Hence partition

is in the long-term interest of Serb nationalism.

The United States can offer both carrots and sticks to bring the Serbs along. As a stick, we could threaten to train and arm Albanian separatist forces and to give them tactical air support should the Serbs refuse a fair partition deal.

As a carrot, the United States could guarantee Serbs leaving Kosovo safe passage to their new homes and compensation for their loss of property and jobs. We could lean on our European allies to help create a fund for that purpose.

Yes, independence for Kosovo would complicate the Clinton Administration's efforts to hold Bosnia and Macedonia together. But those are lost causes anyway.

The effort to stitch Bosnia back together has failed: the Bosnian Serb and Croatian communities both reject the joint Bosnian government, and only the presence of NATO troops keeps the peace. Macedonia is another Kosovo in the making. Ethnic Albanians make up somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of the Macedonian population, and their numbers are growing, as is their desire for independence.

It is hard for Americans to understand that the breakup of large countries into smaller states can sometimes lead to stability. But unless we intend to intervene in Kosovo and to occupy Bosnia and Macedonia forever, the only way to stop the spread of violence and civil war is to help the antagonists find the best ways to divorce.