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The U.S. and the Search for Stability in S.E. Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean

Recent developments in South Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean raise serious concerns about regional stability and about the long-term consequences of American policy in this region.

Since the late 1940's and the assumption of world leadership by the United States, the search for stability in South Eastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and by extension in the Middle East, has been a constant objective of American foreign policy. The proclamation of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947 marked the beginning of America's commitment to this strategic region. It also marked the gradual displacement of Great Britain, the imperial power that had dominated this region until then. Even though throughout the Cold War the focus of American policy was in Europe's central front, the United States placed considerable strategic significance to Greece, Turkey and to the Eastern Mediterranean. As the Cold War progressed, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf became an integrated strategic basin for American security¹.

The United States reluctantly accepted the Churchill-Stalin October 1944 Moscow agreement on the Balkans, known as the "percentages agreement". Washington relied on various measures to pursue the goal of stability, including: (1) The entry of Greece and Turkey in NATO, despite European objections; (2) Bilateral and multilateral alliances, such as the Balkan Pact, CENTO², and various defence cooperation

1. Roberto Aliboni, *European Security Across the Mediterranean*, Paris: Institute for Security Studies/WEU, 1991; Ian Lesser, *Mediterranean Security*, Santa Monica: RAND, 1992; Jed C. Snyder, *Defending the Fringe: NATO, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1987; Albert Wohlstetter, "Meeting the Threat in the Persian Gulf", *Survey* 25:2 (1980) 128-188.

2. John C. Campbell, *Defence of the Middle East*, rev. ed., New York: Harper and Bros.,

agreements; (3) Arms sales and military assistance programs; (4) Engaging and supporting Yugoslavia, especially prior to 1955, to protect her from Soviet pressures; (5) Managing elections and regime changes³ through active involvement in the domestic political processes of allied countries; (6) Working with and supporting conservative political élites that shared Washington's political and security goals; (7) Managing internal "family" conflicts, such as the Greco-Turkish conflict over Cyprus, in order to protect NATO's cohesion and effectiveness and avoid the exploitation of these problems by the Soviet Union; (8) Managing civil conflicts and taking steps to contain these conflicts⁴.

Stability issues in the Eastern Mediterranean region were affected by Soviet attempts to penetrate the region. In addition, there was the multifaceted Middle East crisis which included the Arab-Israeli conflict; the Palestinian problem; the demise of conservative regimes; the lack of economic and social reform; the rise of Arab nationalism and, after 1979, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and related terrorist acts. These problems had economic, political and strategic implications for the United States. Controlling access to adequate supplies of oil and gas and securing the transportation routes of these energy supplies was vital to the economies of the United States, Western Europe, and other Asian allies. Following Britain's displacement from the region, Washington based its search for stability with tactics similar to those employed in South Eastern Europe. In addition, emphasis was given to four strategic pillars, Iran, Israel, Turkey and post-Sadat Egypt. The Iranian pillar collapsed in 1979 with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, a new force that continues to challenge American interests worldwide.

Developments in the last two decades of the Cold War stimulated new American concerns over regional stability. Post-Junta Greece entered a new era of democratization and liberalization of its political system⁵, while membership in the EEC provided a buffer from the influence Washington had exerted over the Greek political system. The

1960; John O. Iatrides, *Balkan Triangle*, The Hague: Mouton, 1968.

3. See the series *Foreign Relations of the United States* from 1947-1955 for the American involvement in Greek politics, the Italian elections, etc.

4. Pressures were exerted on the Greek political and military leadership to stay out of Albania during the Greek Civil War.

5. The legalization of the Greek Communist Party, the establishment of PASOK, etc.

rise of new political forces such as PASOK challenged, at least at the declaratory level, Greece's dependence on Washington and its consequences. The deterioration in Greek-Turkish relations following Turkey's invasion of Cyprus and its claims in the Aegean continued to affect the effectiveness and cohesion of NATO's South Eastern flank.

Looking back at the Cold War period, it is clear that Washington's quest for stability sacrificed democracy, the rule of law and human rights on the altar of short-term strategic needs. These policies led to alliances with unsavoury regimes, such as the Juntas that ruled Greece and Turkey; the support extended to Saddam Hussein in the eight year war against Iran; and the toleration and support given to Turkey's invasion and occupation of Cyprus, and its bloody suppression of the Kurds. There was no apparent concern that such policies inevitably resulted in anti-American outbursts and created "blowback" situations that would haunt American policy years later. Again, the case of Iraq and of the mujahedin in Afghanistan readily comes to mind.

Once the two superpowers came to an understanding about the limits and risks of their competition and implicitly accepted each other's spheres of influence, the Cold War period turned out to be a period of stability. During the Cold War, most sources of systemic instability were internal to each bloc or in the grey peripheral areas of these blocs⁶.

The Post-Cold War Period (1990-2001)

The end of the Cold War removed the threat of nuclear war and that of the Soviet Union as the focus of American policy. After decades of high defence expenditures, the American public sought a peace dividend from reduced military spending and overseas commitments.

The 1990's can be described as a transitional decade for American foreign policy. Washington re-evaluated its role in the international system and sought a foreign policy theme to reflect the condition of the new international environment. The economic, social and political changes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union called for a focus on democratization, economic liberalization, political, economic and

6. Such as the Yugoslav-Bulgarian flare-ups over "Macedonia"; the Soviet invasions of Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1978); the American involvement in Vietnam; the Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus and later with Turkey's revisionist claims in the Aegean.

social reform, the rule of law and calls for sustained humanitarian action. The “rule of law” was at the heart of former President Bush’ “New World Order” and of his response to the Gulf crisis (1990-1991). However, the economic, political and social transitions of the former communist states were fraught with instability. This is why the quest for stability remained a key American objective. In the absence of a coherent strategy, American policy moved from problem to problem.

With the end of the Cold War all states in the region began reappraising their role in order to protect and promote their interests. Turkey, under President Ozal, presented itself as the guardian of Western interests from the Caspian and its newly discovered energy sources to the Adriatic. Turkey’s new mythology presented the country as “an island of stability in a sea of instability” thanks to its historical ties and its cultural affinity to the region. Turkey also claimed to be a “model” for the region because it was “democratic”, Muslim, and had a free market economy. Washington warmly endorsed Ozal’s vision. That, along with Turkey’s continuing revisionism in the Aegean caused new anxiety in Athens.

The 90’s were a troubled period for Greece. Greco-Turkish tensions included near crisis situations over Imia, the placement of Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missiles in Cyprus, and the capture of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan. Greece also found itself mired in the Balkan crisis that erupted following Yugoslavia’s break-up.

The crisis in the Balkans caused by the rise of Balkan nationalism and by the rapid disintegration of Yugoslavia caught all of the Western community, including Greece, by surprise. Yugoslavia’s collapse provided the first major crisis in post-Cold War Europe. The United States was a new comer in the Balkans. It knew little about the region, its history and politics. Simplistic analyses such as Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts*⁷ provided dangerous interpretations as to the origins and implications of the Balkan crisis. The mobilization of an uninformed and reluctant American public was based on humanitarian appeals but also, on apocalyptic terms based on simplistic and inaccurate historical precedents, including that both World Wars originated in the Balkans.

Washington’s Balkan engagement also reflected the tensions and

7. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992.

rivalries in European-American relations. The secession by former Yugoslav republics and their hasty recognition by the United States and European countries increased regional instability. American-European rivalry in the Balkans influenced these recognition decisions, with the United States actively seeking a new zone of influence from Albania to the West to Bulgaria in the East.

Balkan instability was further enhanced by three other largely neglected factors. One was the role of NGO's advocating border changes in the interest of promoting and protecting human rights. The second was the role of ethnic lobbies that pressured the United States government into action. They also helped legitimize, organize and finance radical Balkan political groups and promoted their nationalist/revisionist agendas. This was the case of the Albanian-American community, which was primarily concentrated on the East Coast of the United States and that of the Slav-Macedonians, mainly in the American Midwest and in Canada. Third, Washington had no difficulty supporting and working with unsavoury groups in Albania and Kosovo⁸, or even covertly co-operating with Iran to build up the Muslim forces in Bosnia in order to bring about desired political changes.

In addition to providing a new source of instability, the crisis in the Balkans enhanced European-American tensions that were only temporarily masked over with the acceptance of NATO's new Charter in 1999. NATO, much like the United States, was in search of a mission in the aftermath of the Cold War. It expanded to Russia's doorstep, while virtually excluding Russia from the emerging new security mechanisms⁹. It also legitimized NATO's out of area operations. The alliance tested its new powers in Kosovo, but this only highlighted Europe's continuing military dependence on the US. This fact was confirmed after the September 11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan. It also enhanced the transatlantic debate about American strategic objectives, burden sharing, decision-making structures and processes.

Once Washington intervened and assumed control of the various crises in the Balkans, it claimed credit for bringing about the Dayton

8. The classic case is that of the Albanian UCK. This group, until the late 90's was on the State Department's narcoterrorist groups. The group became the KLA and was financed, trained and equipped by the U.S. to fight in Kosovo against the Serbs.

9. Except for a cosmetic consultative relationship.

Accord on Bosnia and the Interim Agreement between the FYROM and Greece in 1995. Similar American initiatives defused crises between Greece and Turkey¹⁰. Washington was contemptuous of the spasmodic and ineffective European response to these problems¹¹.

Washington's military engagement in the Balkans and in the Gulf region reflected the lessons of Vietnam. Fearful of the lack of public support, Washington sought to avoid protracted conflicts and high American casualties. Consequently, American engagements relied primarily on high technology weapons that limited civilian and military casualties. Washington also sought the legitimacy of an international coalition to support its objectives. The American declaratory rhetoric about the rule of law and on the implementation of the United Nations resolutions in the case of Kuwait, Iraq and the Balkans, was contradicted by the unwillingness to hold Turkey to the same standards, despite its continuing occupation of Cyprus and its treatment of the Kurds. Similar was the situation with Israel and its treatment of the Palestinians. The American entry in the Balkan quagmire was marked by the absence of an exit strategy, an issue that confronted George W. Bush' administration after September 11.

Since September 2001

The election of George Bush brought a reappraisal of America's role in the new international system. Condoleezza Rice, the president's National Security Advisor and the foreign policy "brain" of the new administration, along with the resurrected Cold War hawks such as Vice President Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle¹² and others, were critical of

10. The 1996 Imia crisis; the crisis over the capture of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan; the attempted deployment of the Russian S-300 anti-aircraft missile system on Cyprus.

11. In the aftermath of the 1996 Imia crisis between Greece and Turkey, Richard Holbrooke said that during a night of a near war confrontation, while Washington manned the phones and managed the crisis, "Europe slept".

12. See Rice's "Promoting the National Interest", *Foreign Affairs* 79:2 (2000) 45-62. Many of these individuals were known for their ties to the government of Israel, for their lobbying activities for the governments of Turkey and Israel, and for their ties to the energy sector and to major construction companies with interests in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Balkan style American humanitarian and peacekeeping commitments. These commitments degraded America's military capability and detracted from the primary deterrent role of US forces. Washington was firm that it was not anymore "the emergency response team" which had allowed the Europeans not to share the security burden while being free to criticize American motives and objectives.

The new administration wanted regional actors to assume responsibility for regional stability. This included the EU taking primary responsibility for economic recovery and peacekeeping in the Balkans, and for countries like Turkey and Israel to play a stabilizing role in Central Asia, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. Washington also encouraged the development of a European defence identity, as long as it was expressed through NATO so that the United States could control its actions.

September 11th dramatically changed the low priority given by the Bush administration to foreign policy. It also showed how a minor actor and an asymmetrical threat could reprioritize a hyperpower's national security and foreign policy agenda. The "war on terrorism" provided a new and unanticipated focus to US policy, something that had been missing since the end of the Cold War. Thus, the emerging Middle East crisis and the Balkans¹³ became peripheral issues, as even a hyperpower faced limits as to how many problem areas it could handle simultaneously. The war on terrorism provided Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld the opportunity for a gradual Balkan disengagement and for shifting the burden for "Amber Fox" in the FYROM, KFOR and SFOR to the EU and NATO. Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and his cohorts opposed the American involvement in nation building activities in the Balkans. Nation building has now become an objective of American policy in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The war on terrorism also required reliance on unholy alliances. Countries like Russia, China, Israel, Turkey, Pakistan, to name a few, joined the global fight on terrorism in anticipation of political and economic benefits. The war became a means of justifying their human

13. A new intifada erupted in the Palestinian territories following the collapse of Clinton's peace initiatives and Sharon's rise to power in Israel. There was also the Albanian uprising in the FYROM in the spring and summer of 2001.

rights abuses. But the reality of the unholy alliances has been that they create “blowback” situations that undermine Washington’s quest for stability. Recent history has been replete with such examples. Saddam Hussein was an effective ally in containing Iran, until he invaded Kuwait. Islamic fundamentalist groups served well the anti-Soviet cause in Afghanistan until the Taliban became a direct threat to US security. The UCK that had been on Washington’s narcoterrorist list, served well in achieving certain goals in Kosovo until its NLA cohorts decided to extend their ethnonationalist goals to the FYROM. Today, Albanian ethnonationalist groups have replaced the Serbs as the primary source of Balkan instability. Washington has failed to see that such groups and countries have their own long-term agendas that they promote by capitalizing on America’s shifting interests.

The shift of American policy priorities may be a mixed blessing for the Balkans and for stability in South Eastern Europe. Since 9/11, the Balkans, literally, “slipped off” the radar screen even though the potential for future flare-ups has not changed. Once more, the Balkans became a secondary issue in American policy. At this point, the region presents neither a humanitarian nor an armed crisis. On the “good news” side, the region enjoys temporary peace. Less scrutiny and publicity may allow parties to seek face saving solutions to their problems. The constructive economic and political role of Greece has helped moderate its relations with Albania and the FYROM. The European Union is now active in the peacekeeping, the political and the economic arena. There is also the prospect of future integration of some of these countries in the EU. These developments have contributed to the stability of the last two years. The civil war potential in the FYROM has subsided after the major flare-up of the spring and summer of 2001. However, FYROM’s future will depend on the political will of its Slavic population to fulfil the agreements that ended the 2001 civil war.

On the “bad news” side, the potential for long-term instability remains. Major sources of instability include: (1) Serbia’s shaky transition to democracy; (2) the unresolved issue of the denomination of FYROM; (3) the future of Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina; (4) the role of extremist ethnic groups in the FYROM, Albania, and Kosovo. They continue to promote their nationalist agendas with external support. They have also capitalized on America’s fleeting interest in the

region and its willingness to align itself with unsavoury groups under the guise of promoting human rights. (5) the low level of international economic and technical assistance for socio-economic reform, reconstruction and development. As pressures for similar assistance for Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq have increased, the ability and willingness of donors to assist has not kept pace. This is an important lesson for Cyprus. The US/UN initiatives (Annan Plan) of 2002-2003, included the promise of massive international economic assistance to make an unworkable settlement more palatable; (6) respecting human rights without exacerbating ethnic tensions. This brings into focus the dilemmas created by the future status of Kosovo. Having created Kosovo's uncertain status, no one in the West, and the United States in particular, wants to address this problem. Potential change of sovereignty and borders will not only affect Serbia and its co-operation, but even more so the FYROM, especially if Kosovo gains independence. Break-up of states has turned out to be a much simpler process than nation building or state building.

Transition to democracy, whether in the Balkans or in the Middle East, is an inherently troubled and unstable process as it involves simultaneous political and socio-economic changes. This process is even more difficult in weak civil societies where irredentism, corruption, organized crime and lack of socio-economic reform are the order of the day.

American policy in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean faces many long-term problems. Nor has American policy come to terms with its relationship with its primary allies in Western Europe. As a result of the various crises of the post-Cold War period the issues of consultation, military dependence, burden sharing, the growing technological gap, economic competition, the place of Russia, etc., cannot be avoided any longer. While Europeans remain wary of American dictation, unilateralism and meddling, they are also fearful of American disengagement. The events of 9/11 shifted many responsibilities for regional security to the EU¹⁴. But will Washington tolerate and accept differences in transatlantic priorities?

14. 80% of Balkan peacekeeping forces, 70% of the reconstruction funds, and 37% of the UN budget come from Europe.

The post-World War II transatlantic partnership was founded not only on a common threat, but also on commonly held values that allowed the alliance to overcome various problems. In the post-Cold War period, we not only observe a growing strategic split between the two sides of the Atlantic, but also the emergence of a values gap. This will make the joint pursuit of regional stability even harder. The quest for international stability has not diminished in the post-Cold War period. On the contrary, it has taken new and dangerous directions. This is an important issue as Europe continues to confront the question of the purposes of American power and its own role in international affairs.