
Rationalization of NATO Forces in the Balkans

ALPHONSE F. LA PORTA

No language can describe adequately the condition of that large portion of the Balkan Peninsula—Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina and other provinces—political intrigues, constant rivalries, a total absence of all public spirit...hatred of all races, animosities of rival religions and absence of any controlling power...nothing short of an army of 50,000 of the best troops would produce anything like order in these parts.

—BENJAMIN DISRAELI, August 1878 in the House of Lords

Today, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) maintains four operations relating to peacekeeping in the Balkans:

- The Stabilization Force, or SFOR, in Bosnia-Herzegovina;
- The Kosovo Force, or KFOR, in Kosovo, still juridically a province of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), now State Union of Serbia and Montenegro;
- NATO Headquarters Skopje (NHQS) and a limited peace monitoring force in the federal Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or FYROM.²
- NATO Headquarters Tirana (NHQT) in Albania.

These peacekeeping operations in the southern Balkans, derived from the strife perpetrated by authoritarian regimes and the subsequent fracturing of Yugoslavia, are often cited as successful models of external intervention to prevent civil, inter-ethnic, or intra-Balkan conflict. Indeed, the “velvet fist” of NATO applied in support of international efforts to prevent widespread ethnic conflict in Macedonia in mid-2001 was perhaps the most conspicuous example of preventive action by the Western allies. In this context, and at the invitation of the government in Skopje, NATO worked with the European Union (EU), the Organization for

Alphonse F. La Porta is Political Advisor to the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in Southern Europe.¹

Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), other international organizations, and allied diplomatic representatives to fashion a political Framework Agreement for accommodation between the government, political parties, and ethnic Albanian factions.

More fundamentally, NATO's mandate, derived separately for SFOR and KFOR, was to provide a "safe and secure environment" in which local institutions, under the tutelage of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina and UNMIK, the United Nations Interim Administration in Kosovo, would progressively develop local governmental and institutional capacities along the lines of European liberal democracies. The breadth of NATO's "safe and secure" mandate has allowed SFOR and KFOR to engage in many areas, some of which—for instance, local law enforcement—may be more appropriate for civilian and other intergovernmental agencies. Notwithstanding, NATO has worked in close concert with OHR, UNMIK, the OSCE, the EU, the EU Monitoring Mission, Stability Pact, Council of Europe, the UN family of agencies, and other organizations to support indigenous economic, social, and political development.

As Admiral Gregory G. Johnson, NATO commander in the Southern Region and joint forces commander for Balkans operations, recently observed,

The Alliance has unquestionably been key to the reestablishment of a period of stability and security in the [Balkan] region. As this period of stability and security progresses, so does the people's investment in the installation of a culture of peace. As this becomes more accepted within the region we have seen and can take a realistic look at reducing the numbers of troops we have on the ground in the Balkans. This is not only an indication of the success of the military operations and activities in the region, but also of the political and economic successes of the international organizations working alongside NATO to bring about an enduring solution...³

BALKANS TRENDS

Starting from a high of 60,000 troops in the Balkans in 1999, NATO has begun to "lighten" its force structure. As of January 1, 2003, NATO's force disposition was as follows:

- SFOR/Bosnia-Herzegovina—12,640 troops
- KFOR/Kosovo—25,979 troops
- NHQS/Macedonia—403 troops
- NHQT/Albania—864 troops

The total force of less than 40,000 troops not only includes those of NATO allies, but also approximately 5,700 personnel from other troop contributing nations, such as Finland, Sweden, Austria, Morocco, Bulgaria, and

Romania. As NATO forces are realigned and reduced, cooperating non-member nations are beginning to assume command responsibilities. For instance, in Kosovo, Finland will head a Nordic force in the central part of the operational area around Pristina.

NOT AN OCCUPYING FORCE

What is to be avoided in view of this continuing large military presence is NATO becoming a permanent occupying force that absolves the nascent elected governments and indigenous institutions from properly assuming responsibility for their own problems and successes. If progress is to be achieved toward the Balkan nations' responsible membership in the Western community, it must come as a result of efforts undertaken by the people of that region within their respective jurisdictions and not by NATO, the United Nations, or the international community. While external actors can be partners in progress on the road to stability and self-government, the people in the Balkans will be the ultimate beneficiaries of successful nation-building.

It is essential to bear in mind that the respective mandates of SFOR and KFOR—the General Framework for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina (also known as the Dayton Accords) and UN Security Council Resolution 1244 for Kosovo—give NATO the responsibility for maintaining a “safe and secure” environment, but the task is not everlasting, nor is it exclusive. NATO policy decisions adopted by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and ministerial meetings of foreign and defense ministers successively have stipulated that NATO's force and command arrangements have to be tailored to meet on-ground security requirements, expressed in minimum manning requirements and military tasks. To this end, NATO Headquarters and the military chain of command under the direction of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) are closely attuned to actions and attitudes of the international community through daily liaison in the respective operational areas. Recent success in containing inter-ethnic strife in Macedonia, as noted earlier, is one example of this important and essential collaboration.

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JOINT OPERATIONS AREA REVIEW

SHAPE wisely directed a major review of military operations in the Balkans beginning in November 2001. Also, AFSOUTH, the Allied Forces Southern Europe command located in Naples, has undertaken an internal examination of Balkans strategy, placing increased reliance on the development of local law enforcement capabilities, judicial reform, and military intelligence support. This review aimed at the “nexus” of political extremism, armed violence, organized crime, and terrorism—importantly, without distinction as to geographic locality in the Balkans crisis areas or ethnicity of the inhabitants. In fact, it has since become apparent that all of these problems exist in one form or another in all NATO operations areas.

The Joint Operations Area (JOA) Review has served as a comprehensive study under SHAPE and as political guidance from Brussels on how to rationalize and better conduct operations in the Balkans. The initial review was completed in February 2002 and referred to SHAPE as well as to the political leadership of the region. It concluded that in light of continuing NATO and international involvement in the Balkans, ethnic and political differences could now be resolved through legitimate, though inevitably difficult, political engagements. Although ethnic tensions remain, and local violence occasionally threatens to escalate, NATO’s presence has effectively deterred the threat of conventional military action. The Yugoslav Federation no longer exists, and there is no threat of invasion or hostile military action from that quarter. At the same time, incipient ethnic unrest in some areas, including southern Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia, as well

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as armed groups that operate outside the political framework, continue to pose a major threat to stability.

The JOA Review examined the traditional deployment pattern of Peace Support Operations: initial use of a major, heavy force followed by a period of consolidation and subsequent gradual troop reduction in direct

proportion with progress toward a sustainable peace. The JOA analysis indicated that the preponderance of force and capability, combined with the great influence of the on-ground NATO commanders relative to the political actors, allowed for the development of vested territorial interests. This constrained broader operational initiatives beyond multinational division or brigade boundaries and inhibited close coordination with local officials and international organization representatives. There was little effort at cross-Balkan coordination, sharing of resources across major operational boundary lines, and common approaches to the proliferation of international organizations working in individual jurisdictions.

LAYERED APPROACH

The desired end reflected in the JOA Review recommendations saw a “layered approach” to be achieved over a period of three to five years, depending on local security conditions and political progress. This new initiative called for the involvement of fewer conventional forces as well as reconfiguration on the tactical (local) level to conduct proactive liaison and monitoring, supported by centralized specialist capabilities and in-theater reserves. Further “clout” and back-up was to be provided by a credible reserve force under the operational control of CINCSOUTH (Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe) as the joint forces commander. This operational profile for NATO forces in the Balkans—successfully demonstrated in Macedonia in heavily tailored missions since mid-2001—would prevent a return to violence by retaining the ability to quickly reinforce and launch surge or intelligence-led operations. It would thus optimize the use of military force and yet limit the number of troops deployed.

The intent of this operational approach is to move from being proactively engaged along a broad spectrum of activities in each operational area and adopt a lower profile and deterrent posture to constrain violence and other inimical activity (the “nexus”). The expectation is that NATO liaison and monitoring teams, working in a decentralized and highly mobile fashion in close concert with local authorities, would complement political liaison and observer efforts of the international community. Implementation of this concept of operations would depend on a continuous and hard-nosed assessment of local political and practical security factors, the progress of indigenous civil institutions, and the effectiveness and rapidity of program implementation by the international community.

In addition to this radical (to some) change in operating style, associated actions are designed to help rationalize and reduce the total force. Among them are the removal of “war fighting” equipment such as heavy artillery and tracked vehicles; mobile patrolling in thin-skinned SUVs rather than armored cars and personnel carriers; less dependence on heavily defended central operating bases; and making NATO troops more “user friendly” by equipping them with lighter weapons and taking them out of flak jackets for most daily tasks. At the same time, there is a major effort to trim the top-heavy command structures in the main headquarters and brigades, reducing senior staff ranks, consolidating logistics, and centralizing some staff functions at AFSOUTH in Naples.

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As regards the civil component, AFSOUTH was to take a more active role in coordinating with international organizations on the regional or headquarters level, develop common policies and standards applicable to all tactical commands, and directly engage the civilian leadership of the international community on matters affecting NATO's force posture, important law enforcement issues (such as the transition of the civil policing mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina from the UN to EU), and military intelligence and law enforcement coordination.

Recommended command and management improvements include instituting direct AFSOUTH links with troop-contributing nations, rather than going through SHAPE or NATO headquarters in Brussels; exploring opportunities to multinationalize logistics and training; ensuring that new NATO headquarters in Skopje and Tirana effectively fulfilled their host nation liaison and advisory roles; setting forth troop and other operational needs in a combined joint statement of requirements to be filled by SHAPE on the basis of national contributions as distinct from separate requirements lists from SFOR, KFOR, and others; and reducing functional duplication and general administrative overhead (the important "tooth to tail ratio").

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SPECIFIC OPERATIONAL CHANGES

Finally, the JOA Review recommended a reduction of forces in both SFOR and KFOR and the reconfiguration of command and control in the southern Balkans. SFOR was to reduce its contingent to approximately 15,000 troops by the end of 2002, trim down its multinational divisions to the brigade level, and cut the ranks of its flag officers by September 2003. In KFOR, there was to be a reduction from five to three brigades, further elimination of "static" tasks such as guarding cultural and religious sites, and an increase of reserve forces directed by the Commander of KFOR. The overall KFOR troop level was to decline to approximately 28,000.

Meanwhile in Skopje, a headquarters reorganization and progressive tailoring of the liaison and monitoring functions from Task Force "Essential Harvest" in late 2001⁴ to Task Force "Allied Harmony" a year later⁵ reduced the central component from about 1,200 to 700 troops, including those needed for residual KFOR logistical support operations.

In Albania, the residual communications zone-west, established to support KFOR in 1998-1999, was transformed into a multipurpose NATO headquarters under the direct authority of the U.S. Commander-in-Chief, Southern

Command. Italian and Greek troops under NATO command have been reduced from approximately 1,200 to 500, and the field operations responsibilities of this force have been narrowed. At the same time, the reformed headquarters has been reduced to under 100, and an advance element is being redeployed to Tirana in order to better fulfill its liaison and advisory functions.

The emphasis on more streamlined organizations and smaller forces, together with the phased implementation of the “layered approach,” was endorsed by the North Atlantic Council meeting in ministerial session in May 2002 in Reykjavik, Iceland. In mid-June 2002, defense ministers approved the detailed implementation plan, and its progress is reviewed twice a year at the NAC level.

NEXT STEPS

Implementation of the host of JOA Review recommendations is proceeding. Most importantly, NATO has demonstrated that change can occur once forces have been deployed in peace support missions. Internally, the reforms have shown that a stringent and iterative planning process can in fact succeed with the cooperation of the field commands and SHAPE. The restructuring of NATO forces in the Balkans stands as a dynamic model that is capable of being tested and adapted depending on political considerations in each tactical area as well as on the progress being made in international programs and in developing indigenous institutions.

SHAPE, AFSOUTH, and their subordinate commands are now in the second phase of the JOA planning process. As of this writing in March 2003, the tactical commands have submitted periodic mission reviews together with commanders’ recommendations on moving toward SFOR’s deterrent presence and KFOR’s limited engagement. Timelines for further modifying the force and command structures are still open, pending political advice from NATO in Brussels.

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Continued efforts are being made to train NHQS and NHQT personnel and to refine their operational focus and terms of reference. In particular, these two AFSOUTH outposts are being called upon to improve their liaison interface with host country military and civil authorities, advise on the military aspects of NATO’s Membership Action Program and the Partnership for Peace program, coordinate sub-regional border security initiatives, promote armed forces reform, and actively monitor security assistance programs in their respective countries.

Lastly, there is an examination of the potential for non-NATO forces to assume SFOR’s security responsibilities and the remaining liaison and monitoring

functions of NHQS in Macedonia. Political direction will determine whether it is possible to transfer NATO's responsibilities, but further evolution of the command structures in the Balkans is in order.

CONCLUSION

Through implementation of an innovative planning process and development of operational alternatives for the Balkans, NATO has demonstrated that once a force is in the field, it is possible to adjust to evolving local circumstances without the risk of withdrawing prematurely or becoming a permanent "occupation force." Skill and determination have enabled NATO to modulate its command and force structure changes in accordance with the possibility of regional destabilization, and the pace of local improvements. Some changes have had to be forced: for example, the withdrawal of NATO troops from marginal activities, thus requiring the tactical commands to work out detailed transition plans with the relevant international organizations. At the same time, NATO and AFSOUTH have had to assume heightened responsibilities outside the Balkans, including the development of new capabilities such as a rapid reaction force, defenses against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, the integration of new members, and other Alliance tasks. Fulfilling its operational responsibilities in the Balkans, however, remains the first priority for the chain of command—one that will not be ignored.

In the long run, NATO is working to disprove Disraeli's prediction of what it takes to ensure peace and stability in the Balkans. ■

NOTES

- 1 The author wishes to acknowledge the manifold contributions of Colonel Philip Williams, UK Army, who has been the primary drafter of the 2002 and 2003 Joint Operations Area reports. His hard work and dedication as a branch chief in the J-5 Plans and Policy Staff have been essential to the success of the SHAPE and AFSOUTH planning. Also, the documentary sources for this article are internal NATO and AFSOUTH working papers, many of them classified for security reasons. The author has summarized the main points and recommendations for a general audience to hopefully provide a useful window on the Alliance commitment to the Balkans and the nature of its operations there.
- 2 FYROM is recognized by Turkey by its constitutional name, Macedonia.
- 3 Unpublished remarks, November 2002.
- 4 Operation "Essential Harvest" was officially launched on August 22, 2001, and effectively started on August 27, 2001. During this 30-day mission, approximately 3,500 NATO troops, with logistical support, were deployed in Macedonia to disarm ethnic Albanian groups and destroy their weapons. See <<http://www.nato.int/fyrom/tfh/home.htm>> (accessed March 22, 2003).
- 5 Operation "Allied Harmony" began on December 16, 2001, to be terminated on March 31, 2003. "Its operational elements provided support for the international monitors [in Macedonia], while its advisory elements assisted the [Skopje] government in taking ownership of security throughout the country." See <<http://www.nato.int/fyrom/home.htm>> (accessed March 22, 2003).