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Moscow's Yugoslav Policy Reaching Critical Juncture

Summary

President Yel'tsin will be under increasing domestic pressure to break with the West on Yugoslavia if the international community decides to press a military solution to the conflict. Moscow has thus far sided with the West on important Yugoslav issues, but recent Serbian behavior in the Geneva peace talks and growing pressure from Yel'tsin's traditionalist critics have reinforced Russia's long-standing opposition to using force to end the conflict. Any Western attempt to bypass Moscow almost certainly would play into the hands of Yel'tsin's domestic critics and encourage the government to adopt uncooperative policies, such as opposing important Western initiatives in the UN Security Council and withdrawing its peacekeepers from Croatia. Russia's leaders have recently redoubled their efforts to foster a political solution, in part to undercut Western efforts to reach a consensus on early enforcement of the Bosnian no-fly zone. Although Moscow has spelled out the conditions under which it could support enforcement of the no-fly zone, the Russians probably would veto proposals to lift the UN arms embargo against Bosnia or insert ground forces.

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Reluctant But Steady Support to Date

Over the past year, Moscow has consistently supported--albeit with some reservations--Western efforts to end the Balkan conflict. Despite its desire to avoid fueling domestic controversy by aligning against its traditional Serbian allies, Moscow has voted for the imposition of UN sanctions against the rump Yugoslav state, the suspension of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) from the CSCE, the FRY's expulsion from the UN General Assembly, and stricter enforcement of the sanctions regime. Russia has also joined the Western consensus on less controversial issues like protecting humanitarian aid deliveries in Bosnia and the punishment of war crimes.

Opposed to Military Intervention

Russia's long-standing opposition to military intervention stems primarily from concern that such action would jeopardize possible progress in the Geneva peace talks and ruin any chances for a lasting political settlement. Russian officials have pointed out that the involvement of outside forces in the conflict could spark a Balkan-wide conflagration and that Bosnian leaders are not likely to make the necessary political concessions as long as the possibility for outside military assistance is alive. Moscow almost certainly also fears that outside intervention could lead to increased Western or Islamic fundamentalist influence in the region--an area of traditional Russian interest. Moscow has further expressed concern that Russian troops serving with the UN peacekeeping forces in Croatia could become a target of Serbian retaliation for military intervention in the conflict.

Intensified international pressure in recent weeks for a military solution to the Balkan conflict coincides with growing domestic criticism of Yel'tsin's Yugoslav policy and threatens to undercut Moscow's support for Western initiatives in the UN Security Council. Opposition leaders--particularly in the newly emboldened parliament--have stepped up their charges that the government is selling out Moscow's traditional interests in the Balkans. The Supreme Soviet in mid-December passed a resolution urging the government to use its Security Council veto, if necessary, to block the use of force in the former Yugoslavia. During meetings this month with Serbian hardliners, Russian nationalist groups demanded the lifting of UN sanctions against the rump Yugoslav state and offered to send thousands of Russian volunteers to help defend Serbia in the case of outside attack. Yel'tsin's own weakened position following the December Congress of Peoples' Deputies has made him increasingly reluctant to spend valuable political capital to defend domestically unpopular foreign policy decisions against these kinds of attacks.

Pushing for Peaceful Settlement

The rising international consensus in favor of more forceful actions in the former Yugoslavia has led Moscow to redouble its efforts to forestall decisions on military actions by securing a political solution to the conflict. Foreign Minister Kozyrev last

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month travelled to Geneva to urge Bosnian, Croatian, and "Yugoslav" leaders in Geneva to agree to a negotiated settlement. Last week Russia's Ambassador in Belgrade pressed Serbian, "Yugoslav," and Bosnian Serb leaders to approve the UN peace plan for Bosnia. Russian leaders have attempted to keep Serb officials at the negotiating table by stonewalling on Bosnian Serb leader Karadzic's request for a Russian visa and refusing to assure the Serbs that they will veto any UN Security Council resolutions calling for the use of force in the former Yugoslavia. Moscow has warned Serbian leader Milosevic that tougher actions may follow if the current round of peace talks fail and has attempted to obtain a Security Council presidential statement backing the UN mediation effort. [REDACTED]

At the same time, Russian officials have been vigorously lobbying the international community not to take stronger steps against Serbia. Over the past several weeks, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesmen and diplomats have availed themselves of every opportunity to express Moscow's opposition to military intervention in the Balkans. Kozyrev reportedly warned US State Department officials earlier this month that a move to enforce the Bosnian no-fly zone could endanger the current round of Geneva peace talks and urged a delay in any consideration of a new UN Security Council resolution on this subject. Kozyrev has also publicly stressed the opposition of the UN's own mediators to the enforcement of the no-fly zone and played up his own role in convincing world leaders to hold off on stronger measures. Deputy Foreign Minister Mamedov last week told US officials that the introduction of outside forces could cause the situation in the former Yugoslavia to explode and create a "Lebanon in the heart of Europe." In addition, the Foreign Ministry spokesman recently pointed to Croatian violations of the no-fly zone and Bosnian Muslim attacks on ethnic Serbs as reasons to avoid singling out Belgrade for further pressure. Russia has also continued to press for concrete alternatives to the use of force, such as encouraging Serbian concessions by easing UN sanctions. [REDACTED]

Ratcheting up the Pressure...

Despite their opposition to forceful intervention in the Balkans, Russian leaders recognize that it may be necessary to increase pressure on Belgrade and the Bosnian Serbs to reach a political settlement if Serbian intransigence causes the Geneva talks to fail. Past instances of Serbian recalcitrance have led Moscow to sign on to stronger actions, particularly when Belgrade has rejected Russian initiatives aimed at ending the conflict. Russia's decision last May to support UN sanctions against the FRY, for example, was motivated largely by Bosnian Serb violations of a Kozyrev-negotiated ceasefire in Sarajevo. [REDACTED]

Serbian intransigence in the peace negotiations could also give Moscow the necessary political cover at home to support tougher actions. If the talks collapsed as result of Croatian or Bosnian reluctance to compromise, however, Russia almost certainly would continue to oppose tougher measures against Belgrade and might even call for stepping

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up pressure on both Croatia and Bosnia, possibly through UN sanctions. Moscow is likely to use the recent Croatian offensive not only to underscore to domestic critics its evenhandedness but also to increase pressure for a political settlement. []

If peace talks fail, Russia will probably first try to steer the international community away from considering military intervention. Moscow might even take the lead in calling for tougher political action in order to manage the international debate on this subject and to show Belgrade that it cannot count on Russia's domestic pro-Serb sympathies to forestall stronger Western initiatives. Russian leaders might urge, for example, stricter enforcement of existing UN sanctions or more forceful protection of UN aid convoys in Bosnia. While Moscow probably would still be reluctant to take the domestically unpopular step of backing new sanctions against Serbia, Deputy Foreign Minister Churkin recently refused to rule out the possibility of additional sanctions if the Geneva proposals were rejected. []

A break in the Geneva talks would probably also encourage Russian leaders to follow through on earlier suggestions they can support limited operations to enforce the Bosnian no-fly zone. Kozyrev has hinted publicly at such support and the Russian Foreign Ministry's leading Yugoslav expert last week lobbied US officials for delay of enforcement measures rather than rejecting them outright. Russian officials have recently begun to lay the groundwork at home for a possible vote in favor of an enforcement resolution by publicly making the move toward no-fly enforcement contingent upon a Serb rejection of the UN peace plan and stressing that an enforcement operation would also apply to Croatian planes. []

Moscow's belief that it was not adequately consulted during the most recent coalition airstrikes against Iraq has left it particularly sensitive to Western attempts to manage UN-authorized military actions independently. Yel'tsin highlighted this concern in remarks to journalists in late January in which he accused the US of dictating to the international community on Iraq and Yugoslavia and pressed for political dialogue in both cases. Russia is likely to hold to the enforcement conditions for the no-fly zone (see box) it has set forth even more strongly in part because of domestic reaction to the latest military actions against Iraq. []

... But Not too Far

Although willing to support the enforcement of the Bosnian no-fly zone under certain conditions, Russian leaders remain fundamentally opposed to lifting the UN arms embargo against Bosnia or inserting outside forces into Bosnia. The Russians probably would veto these if they came before the UN Security Council because of the same domestic and international concerns that have qualified Russian support for the no-fly enforcement resolution.

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Kozyrev told EC Ambassadors to Moscow in late December that Russia would only support a no-fly enforcement resolution if it were limited to military fixed-wing aircraft overflying Bosnia and Moscow were closely involved in all aspects of planning the operation. [REDACTED] He also ruled out ground strikes against targets in Bosnia and attacks on military facilities and other sites in neighboring states. While Russia's UN representative last week told Security Council members that Moscow could not agree to no-fly enforcement language that allowed the possibility of attacks on ground targets, [REDACTED] that Russia might agree to defensive attacks on anti-aircraft batteries. Moscow's concern about possible US or NATO encroachment in the Balkans suggests that it would also insist upon giving the UN Secretary-General some form of authority over the operation, such as the right to end it or scale it back.

[REDACTED]

- Deputy Foreign Minister Churkin noted last month that the only possible military action Moscow could agree to in the Balkans was no-fly enforcement and that Russia's abstention on a UN General Assembly resolution calling for a lifting of the arms embargo was not an indication of how it would vote on the same issue in the Security Council. [REDACTED]

Implications for the West

Any attempt to intervene militarily in the conflict over Moscow's objections, to impose additional sanctions, or to disregard Russian conditions for enforcement of the no-fly zone will provoke strong reactions from Russian leaders and could be a break point in future cooperation with the West on Yugoslavia and other issues. Such actions--particularly given the Iraq example--could undercut the already fragile domestic support for Yel'tsin's Yugoslav policy and reduce Russia's willingness to cooperate at the highest levels.

- Even those officials who have encouraged Russian backing for every major Western initiative on Yugoslavia to date--a risky position domestically--probably believe they have gotten little in return. They almost certainly see the West's failure to adopt Russian input on key questions--providing stronger support for FRY Prime Minister Panic's bid to unseat Serbian President Milosevic, for example--as ignoring Russia's legitimate interests in the Balkans. [REDACTED]

Moscow might respond to unacceptable Western actions by pulling its UN peacekeepers out of Croatia, siding against the West on important Security Council votes, declaring a unilateral moratorium on UN sanctions against the FRY, or blocking consensus on

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extending "Yugoslavia's" suspension from the CSCE. Russia's desire to avoid exacerbating the Balkan conflict, breaking irreparably with the West, or provoking the 50 million Muslims living in the Russian Federation, however, probably would lead it to stop short of more drastic measures such as reorienting its policy in favor of Milosevic or sending arms to the Serbs. [REDACTED]

Western military intervention in the Balkans would further undermine the current Russian foreign policy team and might precipitate Kozyrev's replacement with a less cooperative figure. The Supreme Soviet's demand that the Foreign Ministry oppose military intervention in the Security Council suggests that the legislature would attempt to force his recall if Russia failed to take such a step. Kozyrev's recent comments playing up his role in forestalling the use of force in the Balkans to date could also boomerang on him if intervention occurs. [REDACTED]

Military action in the Balkans almost certainly would provoke Russian nationalist groups to seek a closer alliance with Serbian hardliners and possibly to follow through on their threats to send large numbers of volunteers to the region. These groups probably would also move more vigorously to rally public opinion against Yel'tsin in the April referendum and thereby push Russia to take a harder line on other foreign policy issues. [REDACTED]

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