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Bosnia Diplomatic Strategy: Sarajevo Airport

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The Problem

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After their successful challenge to the French at the illegal Sierra-4 checkpoint and their even more humiliating treatment of Contact Group representatives at Sarajevo airport, the Bosnian Serbs know they can keep bullying the United Nations and get whatever they want. The UN has no fall-back position for its talks with Karadzic; it long-ago ruled out the option of enforcing its control of the airport and the environs of Sarajevo. In his initial report on the situation, the Secretary General made it clear that the airport could be kept open only with the parties' agreement.

Referring to nonexistent precedents and claiming that the airport is Serb territory merely managed by the UN, Karadzic and his minions have threatened to fire on UN aircraft carrying anything but UNPROFOR military personnel. On April 27, the Serb commander overseeing the airport turned back a plane with civilians aboard and Karadzic announced that he will never allow foreign diplomats to land at Sarajevo, "especially diplomats from hostile nations, like Iran and the United States."

Prognosis: Humiliation and Strangulation

In the end, the UN may be able to maintain the airport as a logistical base for its own severely limited activities, but unless the UN can persuade the Bosnian Serbs otherwise, Sarajevo will lose its air link to the outside world. The GOBH will be isolated and the city will be strangled by closure of land routes.

And the Serbs may go further. In recent weeks, the Bosnian Serb Army has made obvious preparations for a massive attack on Sarajevo -- digging tank emplacements, replacing wooden and sandbag revetments encircling the city with reinforced concrete, etc. General Smith has said he expects the Serbs to "pick off the enclaves one-by-one" and then go for "the real prize enclave -- Sarajevo itself."

In response to these moves, the GOBH is certain to take into its own hands the future of its capital city. The B-H Army has already engaged in probing actions north and south of the city -- possibly setting the stage for an all-out offensive to punch one or two corridors into Sarajevo from nearby government-controlled territory. As Bosnian Vice President Ganic has stated, "We want UNPROFOR to stay in Bosnia and do its job while the Serbs want UNPROFOR to stay in Bosnia and not do its job." In the case of Sarajevo, the Bosnians will not long accept an UNPROFOR that is powerless to counter the Serbs.

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REVIEW AUTHORITY: Robert Homme, Senior Reviewer

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Our Limited Options

The key to keeping UNPROFOR on the ground and to avoiding the deployment of U.S. ground troops in Bosnia is to take aggressive and decisive measures to keep Sarajevo Airport open for all traffic. The legal authority exists to do so and military options are being prepared.* But if we are truly concerned about the region's future, we must take these steps to keep Sarajevo Airport open for our allies and at the UN, threatening realistic consequences for inaction.

Among our options are the following:

- Using existing authority to permit NATO air activity of the following sorts:
 - 1) Close air support in defense of UNPROFOR troops at the airport, who have in recent days been shelled by the Bosnian Serbs;
 - 2) Air strikes based on the fact that Sarajevo is being strangled;
 - 3) Air strikes based on the fact that the exclusion zone is being violated.

Diplomatically, we could begin with the following steps:

- Consulting immediately with allies bilaterally, at NATO and at the UN on Serb non-compliance with relevant UNSC resolutions, which call for unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance including "safe and secure access" to Sarajevo Airport, and provide for the use of force to protect the Sarajevo safe area. The UN Security Council is to act Wednesday to issue a presidential statement on the airport that will call for its re-opening in accordance with the 1992 Airport Agreement.
- Convening a meeting of the NAC to discuss military measures to ensure compliance with relevant UNSC resolutions.
- Arranging calls by the Secretary to Hurd, Juppe and Kozyrev, letting them know that a failure to open the airport on acceptable terms will make a Ministerial impossible.
- Raising the issue at the May 5 Contact Group meeting in Paris.

*See accompanying papers

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