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4-2-99

Foreign Affairs

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Bomb, Talk, Deal

TOKYO

Now that NATO has made its point that it's serious about degrading the Serb army — and President Slobodan Milosevic has made his point that you can pound, kill and curse the Serbs, but there's just one thing you can't do and that's make peace in the Balkans without them — it's time to get back to the negotiating table before this situation spins out of control.

I believe there is still a basis for a deal, but the Clinton team has to be much clearer about U.S. interests in Kosovo. This Administration has given a dozen explanations for involvement. I applaud its basic instinct to do something to prevent the slaughter of civilians there. As a European power, the U.S. could not and should not be indifferent to events in Kosovo.

But this Administration committed America to a bad peace plan at Rambouillet. The sooner we adjust it, the better. The take-it-or-leave-it deal the U.S. offered the Serbs calls for autonomy for the Kosovar Albanians for three years, protected by NATO forces, and then final status negotiations, between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians, on the ultimate fate of Kosovo. The Serbs rejected both the deal's NATO peacekeepers and its implicit commitment to Kosovo independence.

The only reason the Kosovo Albanians accepted was because they viewed Rambouillet as independence on a three-year installment plan, protected by NATO and guaranteed by America with a wink.

We have neither a moral nor a strategic interest in the independence of Kosovo. Our moral interest in Kosovo is to prevent the murder of innocent civilians, which can be done in the context of protected autonomy for Kosovo's majority Albanian population. And our strategic interest is that Kosovo *not* be independent. We do not want to be formally or implicitly obligated to Kosovo independence, because it would be an endless commitment, because it would send an unrealistic message to Basques, Kurds and other aggrieved ethnic groups that we will support their independence, and because Albania is already a failed state. It doesn't need a twin in Kosovo.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright never should have supported a peace plan that committed the U.S. to anything other than protected autonomy for Kosovo — period, full stop, no further negotiations, unless the parties themselves agree on partition. And if the Kosovars would not have accepted such a plan, then they should

have been told they're on their own.

So now what do we do? The Clinton team is going to have to eat some crow — and eventually they will. They need to put the U.S. behind a new peace plan that is consistent with our own moral and strategic interests, and which a decent Serb leader — and maybe even the war criminal Slobodan Milosevic — will be tempted to accept.

Such a plan would: 1) Make clear that the only final status we will ever support for Kosovo is autonomy. 2) The actual autonomy framework should be based on the generous cultural and political autonomy accorded the Kosovars in the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution — not some foreign-imposed plan. 3) But to guarantee that autonomy for Kosovars, the Serbs will have to permit the return of all the refugees, and the entry of a foreign observer force, plus peacekeepers. If the Serbs will not accept NATO peace-

It's time to adjust the peace plan.

keepers then we should think about using troops from the Partnership for Peace. The P.F.P. is a junior NATO made up of all the Eastern European countries that aspire to be NATO members, as well as Russia. Having NATO-directed and supported P.F.P. forces on the ground can protect the Kosovars, and having Russians among them can reassure the Serbs.

I'm all for U.S. activism. But there are big, important places and there are small, less important ones. And the trick is understanding the difference between the two and finding ways to advance America's moral and strategic interests on the small issues, such as Kosovo, without committing America in an all-consuming way as though it were a big issue.

I'm glad we're punishing the Serbs now for their ethnic cleansing. It's barbaric. But punishment is not a policy. Wars are fought for political ends. The Clintonites should rethink their objectives in Kosovo now, and put on the table a plan that is good for the average Kosovar, is acceptable for any decent Serb, and makes sense for America. Otherwise, we will be bombing the Serbs into accepting a plan that they will never keep and we shouldn't want. □

APR 215:16

The New York Times

TUESDAY, MARCH 30, 1999

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