

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Macedonia: Conflict Spillover Prevention

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Summary

Since claiming independence from the disintegrating Yugoslav federation in late 1991, Macedonia¹ has managed to avoid the kind of violent ethnic conflict that engulfed Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. However, external conflicts and internal sources of instability have periodically threatened to undermine Macedonia's security and long-term viability. International policymakers have long feared that any conflict spillover into Macedonia might swiftly involve neighboring states, leading to a regional war. Protracted fighting since March 1998 in neighboring Kosovo (in Serbia) has heightened international concerns about security in the region. Current strategies intended both to address the violence in Kosovo and to enhance security in Macedonia include staging NATO air and ground exercises in Macedonia and Albania, and extending the mission of a small U.N. preventive deployment military force, including a contingent of U.S. troops, in Macedonia.

Country Background

Macedonia was one of six republics in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. After the secession of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia declared its independence in late 1991 after a national referendum. President Kiro Gligorov successfully negotiated with Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic the peaceful withdrawal of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav armed forces from Macedonia in early 1992. An early stumbling block to Macedonia's integration into the global community as an independent state has been its ongoing dispute with Greece over numerous bilateral issues. Greece has contended that the term "Macedonia" implies territorial claims on Greece and infringes on Greece's cultural legacy. While the name dispute has not yet

¹This state entered the United Nations in May 1992 under the provisional name "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia." Its name is subject to negotiations under U.N. auspices between the republic and Greece, which opposes its northern neighbor's use of the name "Macedonia." For the sake of simplicity, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (also referred to as the FYROM) shall here be referred to as Macedonia.

been resolved, Greece and Macedonia have significantly improved bilateral relations in the past few years, especially in the economic dimension. Under the provisional name "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia," Macedonia became a member of the United Nations in May 1992. Macedonia is also a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, NATO's Partnership for Peace (PFP) program and Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).

The poorest of the former Yugoslav republics, Macedonia has only slowly made progress toward economic recovery. In addition to the challenges of reforming the formerly Communist economic system, Macedonia's trade prospects suffered from the effects of the international trade sanctions levied on Serbia-Montenegro in 1992 and a unilateral embargo imposed by Greece (both have since been lifted). Unemployment currently stands at over 30% of the workforce. While Macedonia's independence was achieved without the level of ethnic violence experienced in Croatia or Bosnia, ethnic tensions in the country exist, primarily between the majority Slavic Macedonian population and the ethnic Albanian minority. The Skopje government claims that Macedonians comprise 65% of the population of about 2 million, and ethnic Albanians about 23%. Albanians in Macedonia have claimed to represent up to 40% of the population, and maintain grievances with the government over their rights and political representation. Ethnic tensions in Macedonia are not considered to be nearly as great as in neighboring Kosovo (see below), where the oppressed ethnic Albanian majority and the ruling Serbian minority are not even remotely integrated. However, incidents during the past year of ethnic violence in the western towns of Gostivar and in Tetovo, where the Albanian population is concentrated, have exposed the fragility of inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia and the great potential for domestic unrest. Many observers fear that the ethnic Albanian population in Macedonia may become increasingly involved in the fighting in Kosovo by providing support for the rebel KLA (see below), as well as more radicalized in their positions vis-a-vis the central government.

Macedonia will hold new elections by October 1998. In the last elections in 1994, the Alliance for Macedonia, comprising the Social Democratic Alliance (former Communists), the Liberal Party, and the Socialist Party, won a majority of seats in parliament. Joined by a moderate Albanian party, the Alliance formed a government under Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski in late November of that year. In a decision that proved to be an error in political judgement, the main opposition parties boycotted the second round of voting. As a result, the nationalist parties, including the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), are not currently represented in parliament, severely weakening the effectiveness of the opposition. Kiro Gligorov of the Alliance for Macedonia was re-elected President in October 1994. Gligorov, who survived an assassination attempt in 1995, has been Macedonia's president since before independence and is widely given credit for Macedonia's continued viability and mostly peaceful existence as an independent country.

International Peacekeeping -- UNPREDEP

The prolonged war in Bosnia raised fears among international policymakers that the conflict could spread to other regions such as Macedonia. In December 1992, the U.N. Security Council approved the deployment of a small U.N. force to Macedonia's borders with Serbia and Albania. The U.N. force in Macedonia was comprised of a Nordic battalion and a U.S. unit, each with about 550 troops. The mandate of the force was

limited to monitoring and reporting developments in the border areas. The U.N. force in Macedonia was the first preventive deployment of an international force prior to an outbreak of hostilities. It was not intended itself to provide for the defense of the country, nor was it to act as an interposition force between potentially warring ethnic factions inside the country. In 1995, the three U.N. missions in the former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Bosnia, and Macedonia) were divided, and the mission in Macedonia was renamed the U.N. Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP).

In periodic reports to the U.N. Security Council, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has assessed that UNPREDEP has successfully contributed to the prevention of conflict spillover into Macedonia, and has had a stabilizing effect in the country.² Matters that remain of concern included inter-ethnic tensions in the country, continued sources of instability in the region and along Macedonia's borders, especially in Kosovo (see below), and lack of progress made by the governments of Macedonia and Serbia-Montenegro in demarcating their mutual border.

Current Status of UNPREDEP. In December 1997, the U.N. Security Council extended the mandate of UNPREDEP for a "final period" of nine months, or until the end of August 1998. UNPREDEP's military component had been reduced by 300 in late 1997 to a strength of 750 (the U.S. and Nordic contingents each have 350 personnel, and are joined by a 50-man engineering platoon from Indonesia) as part of its "phased exit strategy." Some form of international presence, if small, was expected to succeed UNPREDEP when its mandate ended.³ However, the crisis in Kosovo has dramatically altered considerations about UNPREDEP. In May and again in July 1998, the Macedonian government requested an extension of UNPREDEP in its current form for an additional six month period. In June, Secretary-General Annan recommended a six-month extension of UNPREDEP, without any change to its mandate, while other security- and sanctions-related arrangements with NATO and other organizations are developed. In July, Annan also recommended an increase in troop strength in order to man additional observation posts along the border with Kosovo. On July 21, the Security Council voted unanimously (S.Res. 1186) to extend UNPREDEP's mandate for six months until the end of February 1999, and to increase its troop strength to 1,050 (about its original size). Most of the additional troops are to be provided by Norway.

Recent Security Concerns and Kosovo

Though originally intended to prevent a spillover of conflict into Macedonia and to deter a military threat from the north, the U.N. presence in Macedonia has had a stabilizing impact on other potential sources of insecurity such as inter-ethnic tensions in Macedonia, political instability in Serbia, and violent unrest in neighboring Albania in 1997. The U.N. Secretary-General has noted that peace and stability in Macedonia depend largely on developments in other parts of the region, and thereby justified numerous successive extensions of UNPREDEP's mandate since its origin.

²Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council, S/1998/454, June 1, 1998.

³In November 1997, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan outlined two phase-out options for UNPREDEP: 1) leave a small troop presence, about 400 soldiers, to monitor and patrol critical areas; or 2) deploy a small team (100) of U.N. military observers that would operate from field offices along the northern and western border areas.

Clashes in neighboring Kosovo between the ethnic Albanian majority and the Serbian police since early March 1998 have prompted renewed international concern over Macedonia's security and the possibility of conflict spillover.⁴ Observers fear that prolonged fighting in Kosovo is likely to draw in ethnic Albanians from Macedonia and Albania, thus sparking a regional conflict and destabilizing the governments in both countries. Following raids on weapons depots one year ago during the crisis in Albania, the region is awash in small arms. Since April 1998, Macedonian authorities have seized numerous caches of armaments en route to Kosovo; the government recently stated that it did not want Macedonia to be used as a weapons transfer zone and that security would be bolstered at the borders to check illegal arms trafficking. On July 21, three bombs exploded in three cities in Macedonia. While no one claimed credit for the attacks, some observers believe these and other terrorist bombings were linked to the KLA.

Some observers believe that Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey may also become involved in an expanded Balkan conflict, especially if the territorial integrity of the young state of Macedonia is undermined. Others, however, consider this a remote prospect. In response to the Kosovo violence, foreign ministers from several surrounding countries have issued joint statements calling for a peaceful dialogue in Kosovo and underlining the importance of the inviolability of international borders. In June, Macedonian Prime Minister Crvenkovski visited Albanian Prime Minister Fatos Nano in Tirana, where both leaders pledged to cooperate in efforts to enhance border security and controls.

In view of the prolonged fighting in Kosovo, U.S. and other international officials have spoken of the need to avoid a security vacuum in the region. Meeting on March 9, 1998, to address the Kosovo crisis, the international Contact Group (comprised of the United States, Russia, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy)⁵ recommended "adapting" the current mandate of UNPREDEP, and expressed its support for maintaining an international military presence in Macedonia when the current mandate of UNPREDEP expires in August. It also called for the possible strengthening of the present OSCE monitoring mission in Skopje. In its July 8 statement from Bonn, the Contact Group supported an extension of UNPREDEP's mandate. Since the start of the Kosovo crisis, UNPREDEP has increased patrols on the borders with Kosovo and Albania.

In addition to UNPREDEP, NATO has considered and approved options to bolster conflict prevention and containment efforts in Macedonia and in Albania. In late May, NATO agreed to hold a major Partnership for Peace exercise in Macedonia in September, launch assistance programs to help Macedonia and Albania secure their borders, and consider establishing a PFP training center in Macedonia (possibly at the Krivolak training area). On June 15, NATO launched Operation "Determined Falcon," a flight exercise of over 80 NATO aircraft over Albanian and Macedonian airspace that demonstrated NATO's ability to project air power into the region. The PFP ground exercise, called "Cooperative Best Effort," is scheduled to take place in mid-September 1998, and is to involve over 1,000 troops from over 20 NATO and partner countries.

⁴For more information on the situation in Kosovo, see CRS Report 96-790, *Kosovo and U.S. Policy*, by Steven Woehrel.

⁵The Contact Group was formed in early 1994 to develop and coordinate international policies and responses to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since the Dayton peace agreement was signed in late 1995, the Contact Group has met periodically to review progress in peace implementation.

NATO continues to consider a range of options for additional military responses to the Kosovo conflict. These include the possible preventive deployment of NATO forces along Kosovo's southern borders in order to establish a "belt of security" around Kosovo.⁶ The mandate for such a NATO, Western European Union, or ad hoc coalition force might include border patrols, checks on illegal arms trafficking, and air surveillance missions. Given the U.N. decision in July to extend UNPREDEP's mandate for an additional six months, any option taken by NATO in Macedonia would likely supplement rather than replace the U.N. force. NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana visited Macedonian leaders in Skopje on July 22-23.

U.S. Policy

U.S. policymakers have often referred to the prevention of conflict spillover in the southern Balkans as a vital U.S. interest. The continuous deployment since 1993 of U.S. ground troops in Task Force Able Sentry as part of the U.N. force in Macedonia has exemplified the seriousness with which the Clinton Administration views stability in that country and in the region. Administration officials have frequently lauded the success of UNPREDEP's mission and its contribution to promoting stability in the region. The United States established full diplomatic relations with Macedonia in September 1995, following the conclusion of the interim bilateral agreement between Skopje and Athens. Through bilateral aid programs and support for multilateral development programs, the United States has supported Macedonia's efforts to restructure and stabilize its economy, strengthen democratic institutions, and integrate into European structures.

U.S. officials have frequently praised the Skopje government under President Gligorov for its foreign policy approach in the tense region and for its active participation in regional cooperation initiatives. On Macedonia's internal situation, the State Department has noted the government's "constructive attitude" with regard to the ethnic tensions between the majority Macedonian population and the large ethnic Albanian as well as the Turkish and Serbian minorities. The State Department has stated that the United States does not support efforts by minority communities to establish "parallel structures" or ethnically based federalism in Macedonia.

U.S. policies with regard to Macedonia constitute part of a wider U.S. initiative in southeastern Europe. The Administration's new policy priority on southeastern Europe is based on three principles: support for broad European integration including NATO's enlargement; securing the peace in Bosnia; and encouraging regional cooperation.⁷ To these ends, the Administration has promoted initiatives such as meetings of the region's

⁶Atlantic News, May 26, 1998, and NATO Statement on Kosovo, June 11, 1998.

⁷Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs Marc Grossman, speech at the Southeastern Europe Defense Ministerial meeting on October 3, 1997.

defense ministers, the South Balkan Development Initiative, and the Southeastern Europe



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Cooperation Initiative (SECI), which encourage regional dialogue, cooperation, and economic development.

Since the recent bloody clashes in Kosovo, many U.S. officials have spoken in favor of enhancing Macedonia's security. In March 1998, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott called the extension of an international security presence in Macedonia "indispensable" and emphasized that there must not be any kind of security vacuum in the country after UNPREDEP's mandate expires. He stated that UNPREDEP should either be extended or immediately replaced by a successor force. At an April meeting with Macedonian Defense Minister Lazar Kitanoski in Washington, Defense Secretary William Cohen stated that an extension of UNPREDEP would be an appropriate policy for the short term. The United States may also consider increasing or expanding bilateral military assistance to Macedonia. For fiscal year 1998, the United States has allocated nearly \$8 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) grants and \$450,000 in International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds to Macedonia.