

Summer Storms over the Balkans

Mladen Klemencic and Clive Schofield

Introduction

In a previous article (*Boundary and Security Bulletin* Vol.3 No.2) the authors detailed events in Croatia's borderlands including Croatia's threatened revocation of the UN peacekeeping mandate at the start of 1995, *Operation Flash* whereby Croatian forces reoccupied Western Slavonia in May the same year, the Serbian advances on the Bihac enclave, the potential for direct Croatian intervention against both the Krajina and Bosnian Serbs in response and, as a consequence, the widely rumoured potential for a wider Croatian–Serbian war involving forces from Serbia proper. The aim of this short article is to summarise subsequent developments, provide an overview of the radically altered situation in the Balkans and perhaps offer some insights as to likely future prospects.

Indeed, three months on, the political and military map of Bosnia and Croatia has been transformed. Croatia's lightning offensive in the Croatian Krajina, codenamed *Operation Storm* met with complete success, so that former UN sectors North and South have been reintegrated into Croatia proper. Subsequently, in Bosnia–Hercegovina, combined Croatian and Bosnian government offensives made startling advances, particularly in western Bosnia, retaking significant tracts of territory and key towns.

The summer of 1995 has also been marked, at long last, by concerted and up until now effective action by the international community led by the US and NATO. These factors have resulted in a rejuvenation of the US–led peace process and led many observers to conclude that for the first time in four years of conflict there is the realistic possibility of a peace settlement.

Overture to a Storm

Croatia's action in the Krajina was prompted by a combination of factors. Not least among these was Zagreb's growing frustration with the international community, and in particular the UN's manifest failure to make real progress on the issue of the peaceful reintegration of Serb controlled territories

within Croatia's international boundaries. To be fair to the UN peacekeepers and negotiators, it became abundantly clear over three years of fruitless negotiations that the Krajina Serbs were simply not interested in remaining part of Croatia, whatever form of autonomy they were offered.

In Croatia's view, if the stalemate were to continue indefinitely it would amount to the *de facto* partition or "Cypriotisation" of the country which as time went on would be harder and harder to reverse. Coupled with this analysis was recognition of the significant improvements in manpower, training and equipment the Croatian armed forces had achieved since their largely untrained and ill-equipped militias had faced the Serbs in 1991. Prior to *Operation Storm* many observers stated that Croatian forces were likely to be able to overcome any Serb opposition in the Krajina so long as the formidable federal army of Serbia/Yugoslavia stayed out of the conflict – as proved to be the case.

It is likely, however, that action against the Krajina Serbs would have been delayed, had it not been for events in Bosnia in July 1995 forcing Croatia's hand. In eastern Bosnia Serb forces occupied the isolated Bosnian government–held enclaves of Srebrenica and Zepa despite their status as UN declared (though inadequately protected) 'safe havens'. Bosnian Serb forces completed the wholesale expulsion of Muslim women, children and elderly from both enclaves, while draft-age males were kept behind. Thousands remain missing. Many atrocities were reported in the aftermath of the fall of the enclaves with US aerial photography indicating the existence of freshly-dug mass graves in the area. The direct international response was, however, minimal consisting of a few 'pin-prick' air strikes.

Serbian forces from both Bosnia and Krajina then launched a new offensive against another so-called UN 'safe haven', the Bosnian government controlled Bihac enclave on Croatia's international boundaries but surrounded by Serb-held territory. The loss of the Bihac enclave and the Bosnian Fifth Army Corps defending it would have been a great strategic blow to Croatia. At a stroke the fall of Bihac would have consolidated Serb territories in

Bosnia and Croatia, released substantial numbers of troops tied up containing the Fifth Corps and unleashed a new round of ethnic cleansing, atrocities and a potential humanitarian catastrophe. The dire threat of the demise of the Bihac enclave and the minimal prospects of international action to prevent its fall, therefore precipitated the Croatian offensive on Krajina.

The Split Decision

The possible loss of Bihac was viewed by both the Croatian and Bosnian governments as a potential disaster. As a consequence, on 22 July, Croatian President Tudjman and Bosnian President Izetbegovic met in Split, Croatia and signed a joint military agreement known as the 'Split Declaration'. The Declaration made provisions for joint military action to counter Serb attacks, particularly on Bihac.

As a result Croatian forces in western Bosnia launched *Operation Summer* and succeeded in taking two former Serbian strongholds, the towns of Bosansko Grahovo and Glamoc. In addition to relieving some of the pressure on the beleaguered Bosnian forces in Bihac, the Croatian advances provided the platform for the offensive against Krajina. Krajina's self-proclaimed capital, Knin, just over the Croatian-Bosnian international boundary from Glamoc, was semi-encircled and brought well within Croatian artillery range and the key supply route between Banja Luka and Knin running through Bosansko Grahovo was severed.

Operation Storm

Following another round of abortive negotiations in Geneva, Croatia launched its offensive against Krajina on 4 August with the aims of breaking the siege of Bihac and establishing Croatian government rule in former UN sectors North and South. In his letter, the same day, addressed to the President of the Security Council, Croatian Foreign Minister Granic explained that his Government had been "*forced to resort to decisive measures*" because of a number of reasons including the "*failure to implement the mandate of UNCRO which has been proven totally ineffective*" and the "*policy of appeasement of the international community towards the Belgrade Government, the sponsor of the occupation of parts of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*".

Croatian forces, led by well trained Guards Brigades advanced on several fronts and on 5 August entered Knin, the 'capital' of the Serbian statelet. By 7 August Croatian forces liberated the whole Serb-held territory in regions of northern Dalmatia, Lika, Kordun, and Banija and established contact at the international boundary with the Bosnian Army Fifth Corps operating in the Bihac pocket. Altogether more than 150,000 men were engaged on the Croatian side. The number of Serb troops was estimated at between 30,000 and 50,000. Croatian forces thus recaptured more than 10,000km² of Croatian territory.

The Krajina Serb authorities, including the self-styled president Mile Martić, fled Knin. They also ordered the evacuation of civilians from Krajina. In order to avoid direct contact between the troops on the ground and Serbian civilians, Croatia left 'open' two corridors to enable civilians to leave the area. Within a few days between 150,000 and 180,000 (UNHCR estimates) refugees crossed into Serb-held northern Bosnia. A group of some 15,000 Serbs were trapped in Sector North during the fighting and could not flee to northern Bosnia. After UNCRO brokered a cease-fire the Croats organised a convoy monitored by UNCRO and UNHCR on 9 August to allow the group to travel to Serbia via Lipovac (Croatia-Serbia boundary) crossing.

Croatia contends that these population movements represent flight rather than ethnic cleansing as the refugees were not forced out by Croatian troops at gunpoint. The unfortunate truth, however, is that the end result is the same. Indeed, it has now been estimated that between 3.5 to 5 million people out of Yugoslavia's pre-war population of 23 million have either emigrated, fled or been forced out. As one UNHCR grimly put it: "*We are heading towards a cluster of ethnically pure paradises.*" It appears that the combatants are in the process of partitioning themselves – perhaps the ultimate price of peace.

The Croatian offensive was strongly criticised by international organisations and mediators. In addition several peacekeepers were caught in the cross-fire between the opposing forces and four were killed. The strongest critical comments were those of the EU peace envoy and former Swedish prime minister, Carl Bildt. In response, the Croatian government vigorously denied any accusations of its forces having committed atrocities and stated that Mr Bildt had lost his negotiating credibility. Despite Zagreb's denials it was revealed in late September that the European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM) had compiled a report

that concluded that the Croatian government was “largely responsible” for a “deliberate hostile policy which included killings, burning of houses, looting of property and various legal obstacles” aimed at preventing the return of non-Croats to Krajina. The ECMM team estimated that 60–80% of Serb houses in the region were partially or totally destroyed.

It should be noted, however, that these incidents, while deplorable in the extreme, are simply not comparable to the wholesale atrocities believed to have been committed by Serbian forces in, for example, Srebrenica. It is to be hoped that the Croatian government acts to investigate these allegations thoroughly and prevent any repetition. There is, however, precious little sympathy for the Krajina Serb’s plight in Croatia. On 6 August Yasushi Akashi signed an agreement with the Croatian government on the new role of UNCRO in the former sectors North and South. A post-conflict peace-building role was envisaged for UNCRO by the agreement.

End Game in Bosnia?

In response to the renewed crises in Bosnia–Herzegovina resulting from the fall of Srebrenica and Zepa, the British Government convened an International Meeting on Bosnia in London on 21 July. The meeting produced a verbal condemnation of the fall of the two enclaves and warned the Bosnian Serbs that “any attack on Gorazde (another enclave and safe haven) will be met with a substantial decisive response, including the use of air power”. This was followed up by a subsequent declaration from NATO on 1 August that any attacks on the UN’s remaining safe areas would be met with overwhelming, disproportionate force not necessarily restricted to the area of the incident provoking the alliance’s response.

On 28 August the Bosnian Serbs shelled Sarajevo marketplace killing 37 people. The response was qualitatively different from anything NATO had done before and was, as promised on 1 August, truly disproportionate. Approximately 200 planes took part in the first attacks on 30 August targeting communications centres, ammunition dumps, anti-aircraft installations, radar sites and artillery pieces and represented the first time, since its foundation in 1949, that the alliance had launched a concerted series of attacks.

The Bosnian Serbs reacted with shock at the scale of the NATO attacks. Their ability to reply was,

however, minimal. Following May’s hostage crisis when the Bosnian Serbs held UN peacekeepers as human shields against the possibility of air attack, virtually all UN personnel had been withdrawn from Serb-held territory so that a repetition of that tactic was impossible. Furthermore, the response from Belgrade was muted and although Russian president Boris Yeltsin denounced NATO’s “cruel bombardment” there was no indication of Russian intervention on behalf of the Serbian regime in Bosnia.

The air offensive was suspended on 2 September so that talks could go ahead between UN commander General Bernard Janvier and NATO’s commander in the region Admiral Leighton Smith on the one hand and Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladic on the other. Thirteen hours of negotiations produced enough for Janvier and Smith to recommend an end to air strikes – a recommendation which was ignored by NATO’s ambassadors who demanded that their terms be met in full. The bombing therefore resumed on 5 September and consisted of a combination of aircraft strikes, long-distance *Tomahawk* cruise missiles launched from a US ship in the Adriatic, and artillery attacks on Serb positions around Sarajevo by the combined British–French–Dutch Rapid Reaction Force (RRF). In total aircraft from 12 countries flew in excess of 1,500 sorties as part of the operation.

Although the key aim of the NATO action was to force the withdrawal of heavy weapons threatening safe areas, particularly Sarajevo, its wide-ranging nature clearly affected the Bosnian Serbs’ ability to fight. This shift in the military balance of power significantly aided the renewed Bosnian government and Croatian offensives in western Bosnia.

Taking advantage of Serb disarray, in a coordinated operation, Croat forces captured the towns of Drvar and Sipovo and liberated the historical town of Jajce while Bosnian–Herzegovina Army troops captured Donji Vakuf in Central Bosnia. In the west the Fifth Corps advanced into Bosanska Krupa, Bosanski Petrovac, Kljuc and Sanski Most and met Croat forces on the strategic mountain pass Ostrelj connecting Drvar and Bosanski Petrovac.

The impact of the NATO airstrikes was not the sole reason for the Bosnian Serb collapse in western Bosnia however. Serb forces were significantly overstretched, defending an extremely long line of confrontation and were therefore vulnerable to the combined Croatian and Bosnian attacks on several fronts at once. Perhaps of even more importance

was the Bosnian Serb's low morale and consequent lack of will to fight. The absence of support from Belgrade, a perception that the Krajina Serbs had somehow been 'sold out' by President Milosevic, a recognition that in any peace plan much of western Bosnia would have to be given up in any case, infighting between General Mladic and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and general war-weariness all contributed to the Serb's startling reverses on the battlefield. In contrast the Bosnian army was highly motivated as the main elements doing the fighting were the Fifth Corps which endured the siege of Bihac for so long and the Seventh predominantly made up of 'ethnically-cleansed' refugees, many from northwestern Bosnia.

On 14 September, following two weeks of NATO's aerial bombardment and major reverses for the Serbs on the battlefields of western Bosnia, Karadzic and Mladic signed – in the presence of US envoy Richard Holbrooke and Serbian president Milosevic – an agreement to remove the majority of the Serb heavy weapons from around Sarajevo. On 20 September the UN and NATO announced that their demands had been met and that Sarajevo's airport and supply routes through Serb-held territory were open. Meanwhile the combined Croatian/Bosnian offensive in western Bosnia had produced a new military map of Bosnia. On 19 September it was reported by UNPROFOR from Sarajevo that Serb held territory had been slashed from around 70% to no more than 52%, thus almost coinciding with the Contact group 51:49 map and opening the door to a negotiated settlement.

Prospects

The new US-led initiative led to a meeting of the foreign ministers of Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia/Yugoslavia (representing the Bosnian Serbs) with the Contact Group in Geneva on 8 September. All parties agreed that Bosnia would continue to exist within its international boundaries but consisting of two entities: a Muslim-Croat Federation and a Serbian Republic (*Republika Srpska*). The territorial distribution between two entities was agreed to be in 51:49 proportion, but no map proposal was offered. Both entities would be allowed to establish special 'parallel' relations with neighbouring states. The last provision is probably the most questionable. Once the Serbs establish special relations with Serbia, and the Muslim-Croat federation with Croatia, it is hard to see what can remain of the integrity of the Bosnian state.

Perhaps the most potent positive factor is the US administration's commitment to resolving the conflict. As the Economist put it on 19 September: "*Bill Clinton seems to have decided, rather suddenly, that the Bosnian war should be settled before next year's American presidential election.*" The other key consideration is that, for the first time, the Bosnian Serbs may have more to lose by fighting on rather than making peace.

On 26 September the foreign ministers of Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia met once again and agreed on a constitutional framework to establish a parliament and presidency and provisions for elections in Bosnia. Although the American president hailed the agreement as a major achievement and a step "*closer to the ultimate goal of a genuine peace and makes clear Bosnia will remain a single internationally recognised state,*" the key issues of a ceasefire and division of territory were unresolved. Thus, US peace negotiator Richard Holbrooke warned that "*We remain a long way from peace.*"

Despite the undeniable progress being made towards a settlement there are still plenty of factors that could derail the peace process. Among these uncertainties is the fragile nature of the Croat-Bosnian federation. The military alliance which has brought such spectacular success in western Bosnia is built on the shaky foundations of the US-sponsored Washington Agreement of 1 March 1994 which created a Federation of Bosnia and Hercegovina. Since the Washington accord there has been little perceptible progress towards political integration of the Bosnian and Croat halves of the Federation. Were the Croat-Muslim Federation in Bosnia to fall apart however, it is highly unlikely that the Sarajevo government, with around 120,000 men under arms, would accept a solution which left them with an unviable rump state without a fight.

There has also been concern that the Bosnian army's success on the ground has made the 51:49 division of Bosnia, as called for by the US peace initiative, substantially less attractive. This led to US pressure on Croatia to withdraw its support from the Bosnians and thus slow down Bosnian army gains in September. Similarly, there is the fear that if the Bosnian Serbs lose too much Belgrade's stance will also harden and put the peace plan in jeopardy. The Western allies alienation of Russia, the Serb's traditional ally, is thus also an important factor as is the ongoing Serb occupation of the Eastern Slavonia region in Croatia.

The Eastern Slavonia Question

The continued Serb occupation of Eastern Slavonia is perhaps the most significant obstacle to an overall peace settlement. After the fall of Krajina, Eastern Slavonia is the only occupied part of Croatia remaining. It covers the easternmost part of Croatia along the Danube river. The Serbs there control the Baranja region and the eastern part of Slavonia, altogether 4.6% of Croatian territory. According to a pre-war 1991 census there were 193,513 inhabitants, among them 85,086 (44.5%) Croats, 67,676 (35%) Serbs and 39,751 (20.5%) others. The vast majority of the non-Serb population, Croats, Hungarians, Slovaks, Ruthenians and others, have been expelled since 1991.

Although the lines of confrontation have been stable in the region since 1991, tension has always been high and especially so in the aftermath of *Operation Storm*. Support for the occupation from Serbia proper is clear and there are at least two pontoon bridges across the Danube for the resupply and reinforcement of the Serb garrison in the region.

Serbia has consistently refused to recognise Croatian sovereignty over the area and there appears to be little sign of a change in this stance. For their part, the Croatian government has expressed its willingness to contemplate some form of transitional international rule over the region prior to full reintegration into Croatia but, encouraged by recent military successes and faced with apparent Serb intransigence on the issue, has also stated that it will not wait for a solution endlessly. As Croatia's defence minister, Gojko Susak, has stated: "*Our estimate is that we are able to liberate [Eastern Slavonia] by force, if negotiations fail.*" (Economist, 12/8/95).

Were Croatia to launch an offensive against Eastern Slavonia it would once again raise the dire prospect of a direct clash between Croatia and Serbia/Yugoslavia proper and a widening of the Balkan war. The Eastern Slavonia issue has therefore been accorded high priority in the US peace plan but, as the Economist noted on 23 September: "*Unlike Bosnia there are no signs of compromise in Eastern Slavonia.*"

Mladen Klemencic is a political geographer working at the Lexicographic Institute 'Miroslav Krleža' in Zagreb. Clive Schofield is Deputy Director of the International Boundaries Research Unit.

Figure 1: Serb-held territory in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Beginning of 1995)



Figure 2: Serb-held territory in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Mid-September 1995)

