

THE LESSON OF BOSNIA

...is that an international protectorate solves nothing, says David Chandler

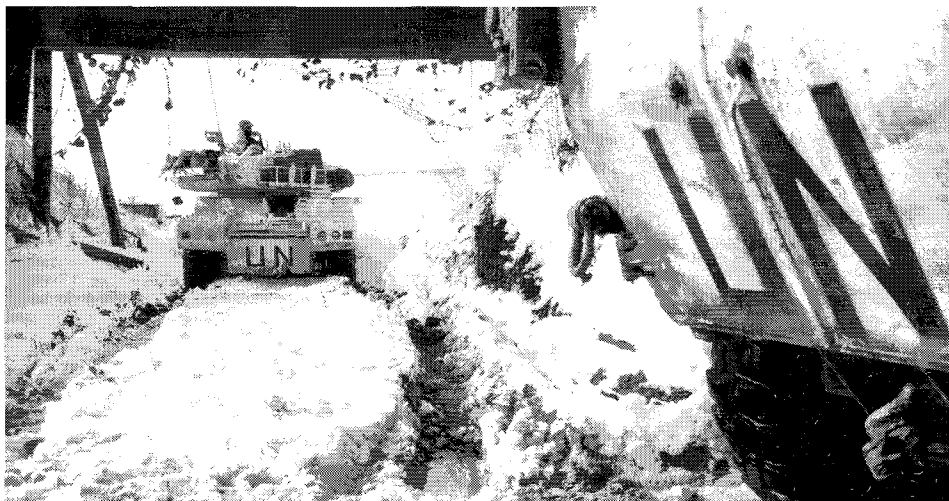
NATO politicians have asserted at different times that Kosovo can no longer remain part of Serbia, cannot join Albania, cannot become an independent state and cannot be partitioned. The only alternative that leaves is to establish an international protectorate in Kosovo, regardless of the wishes of Albanians, Serbs, or other peoples in the region. The model for such an internationally administered statelet is Bosnia under the US-sponsored Dayton Agreement, which ended the civil war there by establishing a quasi-protectorate in November 1995.

From the start of their bombing campaign, Tony Blair and Bill Clinton talked up the Bosnian intervention as a successful example of how military action can be a precursor to an imposed settlement. Liberal critics first argued that NATO should take the Bosnia model further by expanding the conflict to a ground war, in order to establish a protectorate. Then others argued for a return of the inter-war 'mandate system' (*Observer*, 4 April) or the revision of the Balkans under a new Congress of Berlin (Tariq Ali, *Guardian*, 1 April). There has been little challenge to the assertion that 'the only viable course is to use the Bosnian precedent and establish a NATO protectorate in Kosovo' (*Observer*, 28 March).

But only a blindness to the problems of international involvement in Balkan politics can deem 'the Bosnian precedent' to be a realistic or viable option for Kosovo.

NATO policymakers have forced themselves into a corner in Kosovo, seeking to face down both Serb and Albanian claims, and pushing instead for an international 'autonomy' supported by neither side. The same occurred in Bosnia, where the 'international community' intervened to forge a new state to which most of its citizens had no wish to belong. A protectorate was the only viable measure, as the Serbs and Croats wished to be citizens of their neighbouring states, while the Bosnian Muslims were in a minority position that would have been rapidly exposed in any democratic electoral competition. But without any chance of gaining majority support, the West had to impose multi-ethnic governments at every level, in an attempt to resolve the state's lack of legitimacy.

The lesson of Bosnia is that any form of international protectorate can only intensify and institutionalise ethnic divisions. Without a negotiated compromise between the Serb and Albanian representatives there can be little legitimacy for any new Kosovo institutions; and a freely negotiated settlement is the one solution that is automatically excluded by any form of protectorate.



UNdermining democracy in Bosnia

PHOTO: SIMON NORFOLK

Three-and-a-half years on from Dayton, the Bosnian model shows that the lazy assumptions underlying the Kosovo intervention need urgent reassessment. The presence of 50 000 international troops and administrators, drawn from every leading international institution from the UN and NATO to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, has not been able to turn the tiny Bosnian state into a viable or an integrated entity. In fact, international regulation has further fragmented society and reinforced the relevance of ethnic identification.

The Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Muslims have all had their autonomy restricted, and their political parties and media emasculated by international vetting and censorship. They have seen their institutions overruled and undermined by international edicts acted upon by the international community's High Representative, who is empowered to draw up legislation and to impose it against the will of all three ethnic constituencies. The reaction against such high-handedness has inevitably strengthened ethnic identities.

Bosnia today is run by an international administration whose transitional role has now turned into a permanent one. The international community was supposed to cede self-government to the people of Bosnia after a year of transition, followed by democratic elections. However, local people's insistence on voting for the 'wrong' candidates—nationalists from each of the three communities—has meant that the deadlines for international withdrawal have been constantly extended, and now democracy in Bosnia has been postponed to the indefinite future. The international administration is free to dismiss elected

politicians whom it does not like.

The more the international community gets involved in the internal affairs of tiny Balkan states, the less possibility there is for people on the ground to resolve their own problems. An agreement imposed by international troops and monitors is very different to an agreement reached by negotiation between the parties. History shows that once outside powers take charge of imposing a peace settlement on the parties to a conflict, international engagement with the region is likely to be prolonged. In Bosnia every decision from housing policy to schooling and sports is covered by edicts from the burgeoning international bureaucracy. With every new edict that is imposed above the heads of elected representatives, there is greater concern about ethnic group interests being undermined and less basis for any inter-ethnic cooperation. A vicious circle is created in which international regulation, far from being transitional, becomes increasingly necessary to hold the entity together.

The only long-term solution to the growing regional crisis—and the one solution that is never considered by the liberal interventionists—will be drawn up by and accountable to the peoples of the Balkans themselves. The protectorate 'solution' is only on the table because international intervention in the region has destroyed the basis of a negotiated solution.

David Chandler is the author of *Bosnia: faking democracy after Dayton* (Pluto Press, £14.99), which is available to Friends of LM at a reduced price. Phone (0171) 269 9224 for details

