



SRMUN ATLANTA 2019
SRMUN 30
November 21 - 23, 2019
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NATO Brief No. II: NATO's Relationship with Serbia and Kosovo

Upon the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, many of the newly-formed states found themselves embroiled in conflict, both internal and external, that have persisted over the past several decades. Kosovo, whose majority population is made up of ethnic Albanians, had been a part of southern Serbia and had maintained a considerable degree of autonomy within the former Yugoslavia until 1989.¹ Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic had met with ethnic Serbs within Kosovo who claimed that they were experiencing oppression from the ethnic Albanian majority; during this meeting, clashes broke out between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanian police.² In response, Milosevic placed Kosovo under the direct control of Belgrade, which was met with considerable opposition from the Kosovar Albanians.³ In July 1990, ethnic Albanians leaders declared independence from Serbia, with Belgrade responding by dissolving the Kosovo government; in September, over 100,000 ethnic Albanians were fired from their jobs, which led to a strike.⁴ By 1991, Kosovar Albanians had formed a militant network called the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) whose goal was to join Kosovo with Albania.⁵ By summer 1998, tensions had begun to boil over, with KLA fighters killing dozens of Serb civilians and police.⁶ Yugoslav-backed forces sent armored vehicles into villages in response, burning homes and driving out ethnic Albanians.⁷ By the end of 1998, over 1,500 Kosovar Albanians had been killed, and over 400,000 people had been displaced by the violence in the region.⁸ Fighting flared up again the next year, and after KLA fighters attacked a police post and killed four Serbs in 1999, Yugoslav government forces entered the village of Racak and massacred 45 ethnic Albanian civilians.⁹

As international attention to the issue intensified, so did the attempts by international bodies to attempt to assist in the alleviation of warfare in the region. On May 28, 1998, NATO set out two major objectives in regards to the crisis of Kosovo: "to help to achieve a peaceful resolution of the crisis by contributing to the response of the international community; [and] to promote stability and security in [neighboring] countries with particular emphasis on Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia."¹⁰ On June 12, 1998, NATO began to consider further measures regarding the crisis, including the possibility of military options.¹¹ On October 13, 1998, NATO authorized Activation Orders to air strikes in an attempt to convince Milosevic to withdraw its forces from Kosovo and work to end the conflict; Milosevic initially agreed and the air strikes were called off.¹² The United Nations (UN) Security Council's S/RES/1199 (1998) expressed concern regarding the Serbian security forces and Yugoslav army's use of excessive force

¹ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, <https://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm> (accessed July 30, 2019).

² "Operation Allied Force: The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified March 24, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/operation-allied-force-before-after/29831978.html>.

³ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, <https://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm> (accessed July 30, 2019).

⁴ "Kosovo Profile – Timeline," *BBC*, last modified July 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18331273>.

⁵ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified March 24, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/operation-allied-force-before-after/29831978.html>.

⁶ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

⁷ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

⁸ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, <https://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm> (accessed July 30, 2019).

⁹ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified March 24, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/operation-allied-force-before-after/29831978.html>.

¹⁰ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, <https://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm> (accessed July 30, 2019).

¹¹ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹² "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

and outlined the goals for a ceasefire, which led to limits being set on the number of Serbian forces allowed in Kosovo as well as on the extent of their operations within Kosovo.¹³ An agreement was put into place that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) would be able to create a Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) to ensure that there remained compliance in the region, which was accompanied by an agreement that NATO would take part of aerial surveillance missions.¹⁴ These missions were solidified by S/RES/1203.¹⁵ The surveillance mission was further aided by several non-NATO Member States who participated in Partnership for Peace (PfP).¹⁶ A special military task force was created to help evacuate members of the KVM if the conflict flared again, which was deployed in the then-Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia under the direction of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe.¹⁷

When the conflict in Kosovo escalated again at the beginning of 1999 due to the provocation on both sides, as well as the Serbian Army and Special Police engaging once again in excessive force, some mediation was successfully accomplished by OSCE verifiers, but were ultimately overshadowed by the Serbian military's escalating offensive against Kosovar Albanians.¹⁸ The Contact Group, established by the 1992 London Conference on the Former Yugoslavia, convened to attempt negotiations between all involved parties and was backed by NATO, who warned that they would use air strikes if necessary.¹⁹ Initial negotiations began in 1992 in Rambouillet from February 6-23, and continued in Paris from March 15-18, culminating in the signage of the proposed peace agreement by the Kosovar Albanian delegation; however, the Serbian delegation did not sign and the talks fell apart.²⁰ Serbian military and police forces continued to increase the strength of their operations against the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, breaching the terms of the October agreement and leading to the tens of thousands of people fleeing their homes.²¹ On March 20, the KVM withdrew from the region due to obstructionist activity by the Serbian forces, and despite the intervention of the United States Ambassador Richard Holbrooke to try and convince Milosevic to stop the military operations at the risk of NATO airstrikes, Milosevic refused, and orders were given by NATO to commence air strikes under Operation Allied Force.²²

The objectives of Operation Allied Force were to bring about:

1. *"a verifiable stop to all military action, violence and repression;*
2. *the withdrawal from Kosovo of all military personnel, police and paramilitary forces;*
3. *the stationing in Kosovo of an international military presence;*
4. *the unconditional and safe return of all refugees and displaced persons and unhindered access to them by humanitarian aid organizations;*
5. *the establishment of a political agreement for Kosovo in conformity with international law and the Charter of the United Nations."*²³

The Alliance commenced began on March 24, 1999, and consisted of 78 days of air strikes, with more than 38,000 sorties (10,848 of which were strike sorties) being flown.²⁴ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's air defenses were the first target, followed by an expansion of NATO's campaign which was focused on avoiding as many civilian casualties as possible.²⁵ The mission had originally been anticipated to end within a few days as an attempt to convince Milosevic to return to the negotiating table, but instead saw a

¹³ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁴ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁵ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁶ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁷ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁸ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

¹⁹ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

²⁰ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

²¹ "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

²² "NATO's role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

²³ "Kosovo Air Campaign (archived)," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified April 7, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49602.htm.

²⁴ "Kosovo Air Campaign (archived)," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

²⁵ "Kosovo Air Campaign (archived)," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

great rally behind Milosevic in response.²⁶ The conflict in Kosovo also escalated in response, with Serb security forces continuing to commit acts of ethnic cleansing throughout Kosovar villages.²⁷ By the time Milosevic agreed to allow international troops to enter Kosovo, around 500 civilians had been killed in the air strikes.²⁸ On June 9, a Military Technical Agreement was reached between NATO and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and following the beginning of the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo the next day, NATO suspended the air campaign.²⁹ S/RES/1244 confirmed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia's acceptance of the parameters for a political solution, including an end to the violence and a rapid withdrawal of its forces.³⁰ The KLA also agreed to disarm, but the region saw an exodus of ethnic Serbs who feared revenge attacks.³¹ Kosovo became a provisionally self-governed territory that existed under UN administration.³² In late 2000, Milosevic was ousted from government following violent demonstrations and was indicted by the UN for war crimes and crimes against humanity; after being extradited to The Hague, he died in 2006 during his trial.³³ Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008.³⁴ As of August 2019, 100 UN Member States have recognized its sovereignty, but 77 other states have rejected it.³⁵ Kosovo's declaration was rejected by Serbia, who claimed that it was an illegal action.³⁶

The Kosovo Force (KFOR), a peace-support operation created by NATO, was deployed into Kosovo on June 12, 1999, following the end of Operation Allied Force.³⁷ KFOR's mandate is derived from S/RES/1244 and the Military-Technical Agreement between NATO and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia, and it operates under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.³⁸ Its purpose is to "deter renewed hostility and threats against Kosovo by Yugoslav and Serb forces; establish a secure environment and ensure public safety and order; demilitarize the Kosovo Liberation Army; support the international humanitarian effort; and coordinate with, and support, the international civil presence."³⁹ As time has gone on, NATO has routinely adjusted KFOR's parameters to increase its flexibility and shrink its size with fewer static tasks, focusing predominantly on deterrence following the continued de-escalation of the crisis.⁴⁰

Even though the crisis officially ended in 1999, tensions between Kosovo and Serbia have not ceased. Attempts to alleviate the strains in relations between the two have included suggestions of border changes and exchanges of territory, but delegates from both states have not been able to reach any such agreements.⁴¹ Kosovo's parliament voted in December 2018 to form its own army, ignoring protests by NATO and prompting Serbia to declare that it would not hesitate to use its own army to protect ethnic Serbs in Kosovo.⁴² In March 2019, Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj fired ethnic Serb Deputy

²⁶ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified March 24, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/operation-allied-force-before-after/29831978.html>.

²⁷ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

²⁸ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

²⁹ "Kosovo Air Campaign (archived)," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified April 7, 2016, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49602.htm.

³⁰ "Kosovo Profile – Timeline," *BBC*, last modified July 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18331273>.

³¹ "Kosovo profile – Timeline," *BBC*.

³² Martin Russell, "Serbia-Kosovo relations: Confrontation or normalisation?" European Parliament, February 2019, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)635512_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635512/EPRS_BRI(2019)635512_EN.pdf).

³³ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified March 24, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/operation-allied-force-before-after/29831978.html>.

³⁴ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

³⁵ "Operation Allied Force: The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.

³⁶ "Kosovo Profile – Timeline," *BBC*, last modified July 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18331273>.

³⁷ "NATO's role in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified November 29, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48818.htm.

³⁸ "NATO's role in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

³⁹ "NATO's role in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

⁴⁰ "NATO's role in Kosovo," North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

⁴¹ Barbara Surk, "Push for Deal Between Kosovo and Serbia Puts National Divisions on Display," *The New York Times*, last modified April 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/world/europe/kosovo-serbia.html>.

⁴² Barbara Surk, "Kosovo Parliament Votes to Create an Army, Defying Serbia and NATO," *The New York Times*, last modified December 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/14/world/europe/kosovo-army-serbia-nato.html>.

Minister Vesna Mikic for claiming that the NATO air strikes were a “deliberately planned genocide against a sovereign country that fought Albanian terrorism inside its own borders.”⁴³ An April 2019 climate conference in the Western Balkans was disrupted when Serbia’s delegation claimed that Kosovo could not be represented by its national flag, prompting Kosovo Environment Minister Fatmir Matoshi to walk out.⁴⁴

Tensions remain especially high in the northern part of Kosovo, which is predominantly populated by ethnic Serbs.⁴⁵ In 2004, 19 people were killed in the divided northern town of Mitrovica, marking the worst clashes between ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians since 1999.⁴⁶ In May 2019, Kosovo police forces raided these Serb-dominated areas and arrested dozens of people, leading to escalating clashes between the police and the local Serbs.⁴⁷ In response, Serbia raised its combat readiness and threatened that attacks on Serbs in Kosovo would not be tolerated, ultimately moving troops towards its border with Kosovo.⁴⁸ Russia has also become involved in the redeveloping conflict, accusing Kosovo of provocation against Serbia, with Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova saying that the operation “aims to stoke fears into the non-Albanian population” and “seize control over those areas by force.”⁴⁹ Kosovo’s government banned Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić from entering the country over what it called racist comments from Brnabić, who had referred to the leaders of Kosovo as people who “literally came out of the woods.”⁵⁰ Kosovo went on to ban all Serbian officials from entering the state in July, with an adviser to Kosovo’s foreign minister claiming that it was a response to “constant propaganda and false news about the country and our citizens” and accusing Belgrade of trying to create a “so-called humanitarian crisis” in northern Kosovo.⁵¹ As relations between Kosovo and Serbia continue to sour, NATO has remained on alert, retaining its forces on the ground in Kosovo and attempting to mediate between the two sparring states to avoid another escalation of outright violence.

NATO’s continued presence in Kosovo presents unique challenges, especially in the unfolding tensions between Kosovo, Serbia, and Russia. Upon the creation of the Kosovo Security Force, NATO expressed “regret” over its creation, mainly because of the timing of its creation, but supported the Kosovo Security Force under the conditions of its original mandate.⁵² However, NATO emphasized that its commitment remains to creating a “safe and secure environment in Kosovo and to stability in the wider Western Balkans,” and noted that “all sides” must ensure that the decision to create the Kosovo Security Force would not lead to further tensions; this attempt to distance itself while still balancing its peacekeeping operations in Kosovo puts NATO in a difficult spot should the tensions continue to escalate.⁵³ NATO also will inevitably be forced to face potential conflicts with Russia in this sphere. While NATO has made clear

⁴³ Fatos Bytyci, “Kosovo PM fires deputy minister over comments about NATO,” *Reuters*, last modified March 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-nato/kosovo-pm-fires-deputy-minister-over-comments-about-nato-idUSKCN1R61EG>.

⁴⁴ “Kosovo-Serbia tensions disrupt climate conference,” *AP*, last modified April 5, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/50a184cf3bfa4e82ae17fe7d03983838>.

⁴⁵ Jovana Gec, “AP Explains: Why do Serbia-Kosovo tensions persist?” *AP*, last modified May 29, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/5d6963a912494fbaaa21f3ee316253cb>.

⁴⁶ “Kosovo Profile – Timeline,” *BBC*, last modified July 23, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18331273>.

⁴⁷ Jovana Gec, “AP Explains: Why do Serbia-Kosovo tensions persist?” *AP*, last modified May 29, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/5d6963a912494fbaaa21f3ee316253cb>.

⁴⁸ Gec, “AP Explains: Why do Serbia-Kosovo tensions persist?” *AP*.

⁴⁹ “Kosovo Police Operation Fans Tensions with Serbia, Russia,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified May 28, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbian-troops-placed-on-alert-after-kosovar-police-operation/29967102.html>.

⁵⁰ Amra Zejneli, “Incensed by ‘Racist’ Comments, Kosovo Says It Is Banning Serbian PM,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified May 30, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/incensed-by-racist-comments-kosovo-says-it-is-banning-serbian-pm/29972432.html>.

⁵¹ “Kosovo Bans Serbian Officials in New Diplomatic Dispute,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, last modified July 4, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-bans-serbian-officials-in-new-diplomatic-dispute/30037050.html>.

⁵² “Statement by the NATO Secretary General on the adoption of the laws on the transition of the Kosovo Security Force,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, last modified December 14, 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_161631.htm?selectedLocale=en.

⁵³ “Statement by the NATO Secretary on the adoption of the laws on the transition of the Kosovo Security Force,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

its commitment to remain a peacekeeping entity in Kosovo, it may be forced to respond differently should talks between Kosovo and Serbia continue to disintegrate.