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Macedonia and Albania: The Missing Alliance

MICHAEL G. ROSKIN

In his first novel, *Typee*, Herman Melville portrayed a South Pacific island inhabited by two tribes, one kindly and generous, the other wild and murderous. Two sailors jump ship, hoping to land on the nice side of the island. They do and are well treated. Then they must leave for the other side of the island—something to do with a chief's daughter—and take their chances with the savages they have been warned about. When they arrive, they are treated well by friendly natives, who turn out to be identical in disposition to those of the previous side. There really were no beastly cannibals on the island; that was just what the opposing tribes said about each other.

Melville could have been writing about the Balkans today, where visitors are welcomed in each country with warm hospitality and the warning to be careful if they must visit other Balkan lands, for people aren't so nice there, especially Albanians. Once in Albania, however, the visitor quickly discovers that Albanians, within their straitened economic circumstances, are the most hospitable people of the region. "The devil isn't as wicked as people say," goes an Albanian folk saying, "and neither is an Albanian." In the Balkans now, a climate of mistrust—over irredentist hopes, minorities, and just plain racism—precludes regional cooperation and could conceivably pave the way to a Third Balkan War. The great hobby of the Balkans is to bad-mouth neighbors.

There are, to be sure, some areas of agreement that bring together two or more Balkan states, but they are hardly conducive to peace. Serbia and Greece, for example, are historical and current allies and agree that an independent Macedonia should not exist. Actually, Bulgaria in candor would share that view with an eye toward eventually absorbing Macedonia, which was once, long ago, part of a strong Bulgarian kingdom and where the language is very close to Bulgarian. Likewise, all of Albania's neighbors—rump Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and Greece—treat Albania with racist disdain and hostility. Serbia and Romania face a common problem with Magyar

minorities that could lead them to reconstitute (with Slovakia) the anti-Hungary Little Entente devised by Paris in the 1920s.¹

The Missing Alliance

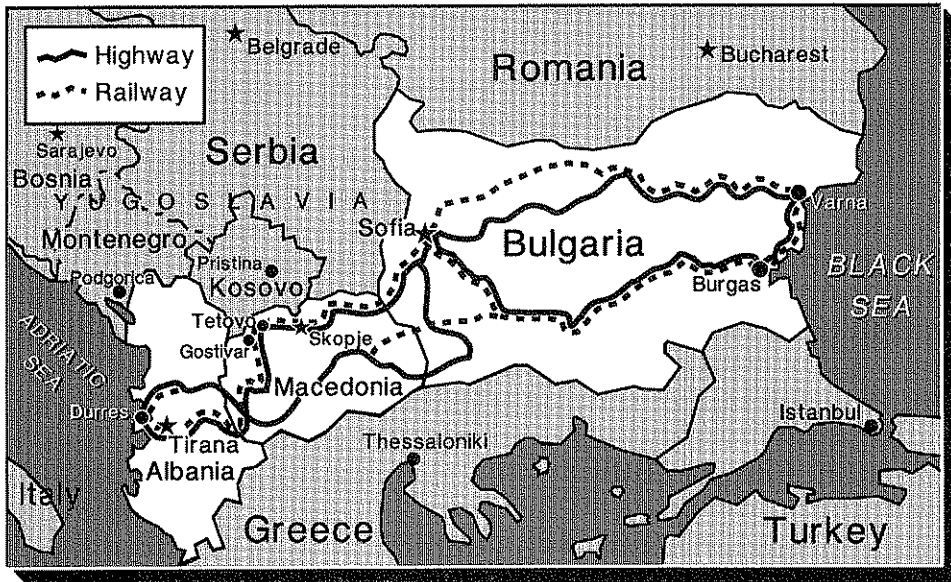
But where the Balkans really needs a defensive alliance—between Albania and Macedonia—that could help stop the horrors of Bosnia from spreading southward, there is none and no hope of one. In international relations one is fond of quoting the old Arabic dictum “The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” because it makes such obvious logical sense. Unfortunately, that little exercise in rational self-interest breaks down in both the Middle East (Iran’s hatred of Israel when they have a common enemy in Iraq) and in the Balkans. Macedonia and Albania have precisely the same hostile neighbors on the north and south, Serbia and Greece, who would happily erase them from the map.

But instead of drawing together, Macedonia snipes at Albania, figuratively and literally. On the afternoon of 26 June 1993, Albanian army Major Hajrulla Tollja, on routine horseback patrol along the border with Macedonia, was shot dead by a sniper and his body dragged across the boundary. Sergeant Vehbi Berzhilla, who was with him, was badly wounded and also dragged across but managed to crawl back even though he came under fire again.² Skopje charged that the pair had violated Macedonian territory, which, even if true, would be no excuse for deadly force. Tirana says shooting incidents occur all the time, that in 1992 nine Albanians were killed and 13 wounded on the border with Macedonia. There are no charges of Albanian forces shooting Macedonians.

Actually, the situation could be more complex—and worse—than this already deplorable incident (which was unreported in US newspapers). The shooting occurred just south of where the boundaries of Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia’s Kosovo meet. Some sources in a position to know say the sniper was not Macedonian but Serbian. If so, it would indicate Serbian forces can infiltrate that corner of Macedonia with impunity, and that Macedonia, which is practically unarmed, is helpless to stop them. It might also suggest that Serbia is preparing positions for military action in the region.

Macedonia needs Albania and knows it but doesn’t act like it. Macedonia is landlocked and has only the skimpiest transportation lines to the outside world. Macedonia’s longstanding north-south highway and rail links are now of limited utility. Serbia to the north is under international embargo—which, to be

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Jim Kistler, USAWC

Figure 1. Proposed highway and rail lines.

sure, is widely ignored in the region. Greece, to Macedonia's south, unofficially blocks their common border. According to Athens, Macedonia has no right to a Greek name. Athens is virtually allied with Belgrade, and freight traffic continues unabated from Greece to Serbia, transshipped through Macedonia but not destined for Macedonia. Business is business, even for the beleaguered Macedonians; besides, why risk angering the Serbs?

In place of north-south lines, Macedonia had to turn abruptly to east-west links, which were almost nonexistent. During the Cold War, Tito's maverick communist Yugoslavia wished to have little connection with its hostile neighbors, Albania and Bulgaria. Consequently, highway routes east and west were unimproved and painfully inadequate; there never was a rail line. High in the mountains on Macedonia's border with Bulgaria, trucks that form Macedonia's chief lifeline back up for kilometers on narrow switchbacks waiting to clear customs.

The solution, now supposedly in planning, is to develop a major east-west highway and rail corridor across Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania, stretching from the Adriatic Sea on the west to the Black Sea on the east.³ A protocol to this effect was signed in May 1993 by the three countries. An Albanian outlet to the sea for Macedonia would be especially desirable, as it would be shorter than the current alternative: The distance from Skopje to Durres on the Adriatic is only half that from Skopje to Burgas on the Black Sea. Turkey is interested in plugging into this corridor, which would then connect Europe's only two Muslim-majority countries. Greece is outraged at the thought, fearing not only a Turkish-led Muslim conspiracy to isolate Greece but also the loss of

revenues from Thessaloniki's role as a major shipping point on the north-south corridor. The limiting factor in constructing an east-west corridor, however, is money—billions of dollars will be required—and international investors are not keen on risking capital in the most unstable corner of Europe.

Militarily, a Tirana-Skopje tie makes even more sense. The armies of the two countries are weak. Impoverished Albania's defense budget is not much more than \$3 million (that's with an "m") a year, barely enough to feed the conscripts and pay the officers a low salary. Funds for training, live-firing, fuel, and new equipment do not exist. In the xenophobic fantasy of longtime dictator Enver Hoxha (1944-85), Albania would defend itself from prefabricated, ten-foot-diameter pillboxes. An estimated 400,000 to 700,000 of these concrete mushrooms are scattered, with little military rationale, across the country. Albania's tanks, jets, and artillery are few in number and antiquated, either 1950s Soviet equipment or 1960s Chinese, but hidden in elaborate bunkers. Hoxha liked bunkers.

Albania knows it is no match for Serbia. A big majority of Albanians fear Serbia and would like to see an independent Kosovo, but only three in ten would intervene militarily to protect the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.⁴ Tirana's official policy is to avoid conflict at all costs. At the end of World War I, a Serbian army occupied northern Albania, and Albanians fear it could happen again. Officials in Tirana claim that Serbian "ethnic cleansing" of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo (these *Kosovari*, as they are called, form close to 90 percent of Kosovo's population) has already begun. Tirana's only reply is to set up, with Saudi financial help, refugee camps in the north of Albania. However, Albanian Defense Minister Safet Zhulali, a former mathematics professor, admits that among the refugees would be partisan fighters, who would make armed forays back into Kosovo that Albania could not control, even though they would provoke Serbian wrath.⁵ Despite its best intentions, then, Albania could get drawn into war with Serbia.

For its part, Macedonia inherited some beat-up AK-47s from the old Yugoslav army and territorial defense forces, leaving it the least-armed country in the region. Many Macedonians worry about a coming war and are grateful for the arrival of even a small force of UN peace observers, mostly Scandinavian and American. In the event of hostilities, this UN force could do nothing.

Logically, everything points to a coalition. Macedonia and Albania need each other economically, militarily, territorially, and psychologically. With their small populations (Albania's is 3.2 million; Macedonia's, 2 million), they are nearly helpless before their common, hostile neighbors. Together, they are a much more serious proposition.

The Despised Albanians

But they won't get together, and for a very basic, primitive reason: Macedonians, like most Balkan peoples, hate and fear Albanians, especially the

large and territorially concentrated Albanian minority in northwest Macedonia. Albanians are perceived much as some Americans perceive Mexicans: poor, dirty, passionate, and criminal. Even worse, they are seen to breed like rabbits and push into and take over neighboring lands. Some Macedonians believe that Albanian women are required to bear ten children. One Macedonian economist called Albanian population growth “demographic imperialism.” Official 1991 census figures say 22 percent of Macedonian citizens declared themselves to be ethnically Albanian (65 percent declared themselves Macedonians). Many believe the actual Albanian count is higher, possibly double the official percentage, and, given the difference in birthrates, Albanians may in a few decades constitute a majority of Macedonia’s population.

The Western traveler passing through northwest Macedonia—specifically, Tetovo and Gostivar *opštinas* (communes)—is surprised at the general level of prosperity. Houses are large, new, and modern; many are under construction. Rest stops and bus terminals are outfitted at West European levels. Farmers work their fields with tractors. The minarets that protrude from each village indicate this is the area where ethnic Albanians are concentrated. If Albanians are so poor, how can they be so wealthy? Most families have fathers working in Switzerland, Germany, or elsewhere in Western Europe, and they remit sizable sums. As former citizens of Yugoslavia, these Macedonian Albanians had no problem leaving Yugoslavia to work in Western Europe. The Albanians of Albania, on the other hand, were until recently locked in.

The ethnic Macedonians, masters on their own turf, felt less pressure to seek work in Western Europe and fewer did so, leading to the paradox that on average they are poorer than the Albanians of Macedonia. The point is that the Albanians of Macedonia are neither poor nor criminals, but hard-working, high-saving people who look after their families. But they are still despised and feared by the Macedonians.

Ethnic polarization is extreme. In politics, Albanians do not vote for Macedonian parties; they vote largely for the Party of Democratic Prosperity (PDP), which has 22 (out of 120) seats in the Macedonian parliament and is a junior partner in the coalition led by the Social Democrats, as the communists renamed themselves. Some observers call this coalition ineffective and crooked, dedicated chiefly to preserving the fortunes of the former *apparatchiki* who are the Social Democratic stalwarts. Skopje critics charge that these ex-communists cling to power by trying to appease their Albanian coalition partners with bad compromises, which simply postpone major internal conflict.

The PDP wants to federalize Macedonia to give the Albanian areas virtual self-rule. Many Macedonians are convinced this is just a first step toward breaking away the Albanian areas of Macedonia and their joining a Greater Albania. This exactly parallels Serbian fears about the Albanians of Kosovo, which adjoins Tetovo and Gostivar communes on the north. Indeed, during World War II, Albania, with Fascist Italy’s blessing, did annex these

Albanian areas of Macedonia and Serbia. History supports Macedonian and Serbian fears of Albanian irredentism.

Macedonian attitudes seem to support Samuel P. Huntington's recent proposal that the post-Cold War world is fracturing along "civilizational" lines. Especially difficult is the clash between the Muslim civilization and the Western and Slavic/Orthodox civilizations.⁶ The Macedonians are Orthodox Slavs; the Albanians are largely Muslims of local stock that long antedates the arrival of the Slavs in the Balkans in the sixth and seventh centuries. Few of either group, however, are serious believers. In Albania itself, to be sure, there are Christians; about 20 percent are Eastern Orthodox and ten percent Roman Catholic. Only the Catholics of Albania really practice their faith, a point that has convinced American evangelists that Albanian souls are ripe for saving.

Huntington's schema does not concern the degree of religiosity; religion merely contributes to the sum total of attitudes, usages, philosophies, and lifestyles that make up a "civilization." Among the nations of a given civilization, people can understand and empathize with each other; between civilizations this is much harder. Huntington's unhappy theory—which I instinctively want to reject as racist—helps explain why the European Community will admit Poland but not Turkey, why Russians come to the aid of Serbia, why Arabs complain bitterly about the West's inaction on Bosnia, and why Americans object to Japanese investment but not to Dutch.

To Macedonians, as to most Balkan peoples, the Albanians, along with the Bosnian Muslims (and the less-heard-of Pomaks of Bulgaria), are a remnant and reminder of the Turks, a different and despised civilization that blanketed the region for centuries, snuffed out its original civilization, and stunted its development. Painfully, the Ottomans were driven out, mostly during the 19th century. What rights then have their religious offspring?⁷ How can they be trusted? Could they be a fifth column for the return of the Turks?

Who Will Save Us?

Encumbered by these rarely spoken, partly irrational fears, the Macedonians are simply not inclined to make common cause with Albanians. Pity, for that is their best hope. To whom, then, can Macedonians turn? Their Slavic big brothers, the Bulgarians, would like to save them and tacitly envision the eventual joining of the two lands, which, before the Ottomans, were part of one kingdom. Sofia recognized Macedonia when it declared independence in 1991, but as a separate state, not as a separate nation, thus leaving the door open for eventual unification. The prime cause of the Second Balkan War of 1913 was Bulgarian retention of Macedonia, which Bulgaria had just won from the Turks in the First Balkan War, in the face of Greek and Serbian desire to divide Macedonia between them. Bulgaria lost, and most of Macedonia was taken by Serbia, which called it South Serbia.

*“The US soldiers now serving as UN peace
observers in Macedonia could get shot in
defense of a country we don’t even recognize.”*

Now, however, Macedonians do not wish to be part of Bulgaria. They argue that the languages have evolved apart over the centuries so that now they have trouble understanding spoken Bulgarian. Bulgaria, then an Axis junior partner, occupied most of Macedonia during World War II and treated Macedonians harshly. Most Macedonian families have stories of relatives who suffered. Bulgarians have no such negative memories of their wartime occupation of Macedonia. Sofia is sophisticated enough to know that any move to unite with Macedonia now would trigger Greek and Serbian rage, so Bulgaria is content to bide its time. Its trade ties with Greece largely cut, Macedonia has quickly made Bulgaria its chief trading partner. Another factor: Bulgaria is the region’s low-cost producer, and Macedonia imports a great deal of Bulgarian foodstuffs and construction materials (as does Albania).

By the time you read this, there may be official US recognition of Macedonia and a US embassy in Skopje. At the time of this writing, however, our diplomatic relations are unofficial and slightly bizarre. There are American officials in Skopje from the State Department, the Agency for International Development, and the US Information Service, but, should you ask, they aren’t there, at least not in a public sense. Inquiries for interviews are coldly deflected. Macedonians must journey to Sofia for US visas. The reason for this charade is not hard to discern: the sensitivities of Greece and Greek Americans and their congresspersons. Full US diplomatic recognition would anger them, so our officials are there but not there. The 300 US soldiers, drawn originally from the Berlin Brigade, now serving as UN peace observers in Macedonia could thus get shot in defense of a country we don’t even recognize.

All Balkan countries are wracked by insecurity and turn with pleading eyes to the United States for protection, as if we were some kind of regional savior. Virtually no Balkan country trusts the West Europeans; their debacle over Bosnia is clear for all to see. Each Balkan capital, with the possible temporary exception of Skopje, has a small group of US military officers engaged in military-to-military relations. Operating apart from and outside of the US embassy (and therefore more flexible and effective), these temporary (one- to two-year) missions are given office space in host-country military buildings in order to render candid, friendly advice. The idea is to build cordial relationships between officers of the two countries and then turn the job over to the more staid confines of the military attachés’ offices in the US embassy.

The US military mission to Albania is housed in the Defense Ministry just down the corridor from the minister.⁸ The American colonel in charge is welcome to drop in on the minister or chief of staff any time. No European official, including the Italians, who supply a great deal of food to Albania, has access like that. The American colonel may go everywhere and photograph anything. He is assigned an Albanian colonel as full-time interpreter. He and his small staff are encouraged to wear US uniforms at all times; the Albanians like the Americans to be seen. It's a little disconcerting to see a US Special Forces sergeant, in camouflage fatigues with bloused trousers and a snappy beret, pop in and out of the Defense Ministry in the center of Tirana. A few years ago, the Albanians would have shot an American military man for attempting to enter their country.

These "mil-to-mil" missions are generally rousing successes, maybe too successful. It is easy and fun to establish friendly contacts between officers of two nations; both sides are eager for them. But they are eager for very different reasons, and in this lies the seeds of serious misunderstanding. The Americans are simply happy to see the host-country army reorient itself to the West, to learn English instead of Russian, to support democracy and civilian control, to entertain visiting military delegations, to purchase US equipment (some of it bargain-priced surplus left by the US drawdown in Germany), and perhaps eventually to participate in UN multilateral military activities. The very general US motivation is that friendship is better than enmity.

The Balkan host countries have something more specific in mind. They are frightened and want help. The violence in ex-Yugoslavia could spill over their borders. Said Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov in an August 1993 interview: "There is currently only a small number of Americans here, but they carry weight. It is a signal to all those who want to destabilize this region."⁹ The West Europeans talk about Europe but do not define the Balkans as part of Europe. Comically, the Macedonian and Albanian parliaments debated whether to join NATO, as if NATO wanted them. Only the Americans can save us, the Balkan lands calculate. And look, they would add, the Americans are eager to come here. Why else would they be so friendly? They probably regret not having taken the Balkans in 1944 and now want to make sure the region is firmly on their side. Well, that's fine with us; we happily accept the protection of a benevolent superpower.

These sharply contrasting motives could lead to a colossal misunderstanding. Officially, US policy contains no promises or suggestions of military help. The excellence of mil-to-mil relations suggests otherwise to the Macedonians and Albanians. President Bush's noble vow to prevent a massacre in Kosovo, seconded by President Clinton, could be carried out only by a US force in northern Albania. Such an engagement would bring us, de facto, into supporting Albanian annexation of Kosovo. Greater Albania has never been a US national interest. Should the United States do nothing in the event

of Serbian ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, our inaction would seem to violate the pledges and understandings we have built up.

And what precisely will US peacekeeping forces do in Macedonia? Is their purpose to preserve a territorially intact Macedonia? If the Albanian areas of Macedonia attempt to secede, will we stop them in order to preserve Macedonia's territorial integrity? Would we alienate Greece in order to preserve Macedonia? Macedonia, too, has never been a US national interest. If fighting erupts between Albania and Macedonia, could there be US troops on both sides?

How far should the United States go in support of Macedonia, or indeed for any Balkan country? Do we in fact have a policy? Pious wishes for peace and accommodation are not a policy. A credible statement of US national interests in the Balkans supported by sufficient military power might be a policy. But such a position will be difficult to establish and sustain; declaring the Balkans a US interest is inherently incredible if the West Europeans declare it a non-interest.

A first step might be to make it crystal clear to the Balkan lands that no outside power is going to save them. They must do it themselves. We must tell them, "If you cannot overcome your ancient mistrusts to construct an alliance among yourselves, then nothing, certainly no power from the other side of the globe, will save you. The only thing that can save you from you is you." Any other message would be terribly misleading.

Natives of the Midwest have vivid descriptions of the coming of tornados. Weather reports warn of them, and the sky turns slate black, but no one knows precisely when or where the whirlwind will carve its destruction. Neighbors stand around outside and chat to relieve the tension; there is little else they can do. If they try to drive away, they are just as likely to run into the storm. A few may go into a storm cellar. Basically, though, all they can do is wait and worry. So it is with the terrible storm that is brewing in the Balkans today. It cannot be averted, no one can say where or when it will hit, and no one knows what to do once it does.

NOTES

1. See Michael G. Roskin, "Slovak Separation and Central European Security," *East European Quarterly*, 27 (January 1994), 4.

2. Albanian Defense Ministry, "On the Incident on the Albanian-Macedonian Border," press release of 2 July 1993, Tirana. Also *FBIS East Europe*, 28 June 1993, p. 3.

3. Carol J. Williams, "Macedonia Sees Highway as Its Route to Recovery," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 July 1993, p. H5.

4. Office of Research, US Information Agency, USIA Opinion Research Memorandum, "Albanians Not Inclined to Come to the Military Aid of Kosovars," 26 August 1993.

5. Interview with author in Albanian Defense Ministry, Tirana, 5 July 1993. Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Ilia Vasho was also present and agreed on the danger.

6. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (Summer 1993), 3.

7. Macedonia's largest party, for example, the nationalistic Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, warns against the formation of an Islamic political bloc within Macedonia composed of parties "that do not originate in Macedonia." *FBIS*, 25 August 1993, p. 57.

8. In October 1993, US-Albanian military cooperation got more specific with an agreement for "expanded contacts" between military officials of the two countries. See David Binder, "U.S. and Albania Sign a Military Agreement," *The New York Times*, 21 October 1993, p. A11.

9. Interview on Austrian television 10 August 1993, as carried in *FBIS-East Europe*, 11 August 1993, p. 58.