After unconscionable foot-dragging, a litany of hollow threats and half-hearted, poorly executed aid measures, the time has finally come for full-scale, international military intervention in former Yugoslavia.

There is, sadly, no other alternative that now remains to halt the barbarism enveloping the Balkans.

The mere presence of United Nations forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina hasn’t fazed the Bosnian Serb aggressors or their masters in Belgrade. Neither rival armies nor Serbia’s domestic opposition possess the resources to stop the Serb regime’s drive for territorial conquest. A quick, decisive invasion of Bosnia-Herzegovina—on the scale of Operation Desert Storm—is the last real option available to the international community, and one that the Left should rally around with all of its energy.

On simple humanitarian grounds, military intervention could put the quickest possible end to the bloodbath in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The six-month old war has already claimed over 100,000 lives and turned at least 2.5 million Bosnians into refugees. Every report about the savagery loose in the former republic seems more inconceivable than the last. No longer can foreign observers feign ignorance about the war’s carnage and the brutal crimes of its combatants, about the concentration camps and the massacres, about the rape and torture.

The international community’s condemnation of Serbian aggression, as well as the meagre UN humanitarian rescue aid for the beleaguered people of Bosnia, has proved to be much too little, much too late. If the Serbian siege of Bosnian cities and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of non-Serb communities continues into the winter—which it will—the body count is expected to soar to two or three hundred thousand.

That suffering, however, is only a taste of what is to come should international inaction give in to the designs of Serbia’s nationalist henchmen. In a larger context, Bosnia-Herzegovina represents a test case for nationalist expansionism in Europe, on the one hand, and for post-Cold War Europe’s commitment to a new democratic order, on the other.

So far, the territorial war of the Serbian militants in Bosnia has made a mockery of every principle that underpins the notion of a democratic European House. The Serb leadership in rump Yugoslavia has defiantly thumbed its nose at international protests, warnings and sanctions, breaking every promise that UN negotiators have extracted from them.

Yet their intransigence is paying off. The Serbs, who make up only 32% of the mixed Bosnian population, now control 70% of its territory. The Croats (17% of the population) call the shots in nearly a quarter of the former republic. Serb and Croat leaders agreed a year ago that when the killing is over, the 43% Muslim population will have but a few tiny landlocked enclaves to themselves. Should Serbia and Croatia simply walk away scot-free from a partitioned Bosnia-Herzegovina, Europe might as well toss the 1990 Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) Treaty—the foundation of a united,
democratic Europe—into the dustbin. The capitulation would send a clear message to extremist regimes across eastern Europe that might makes right, and that the rest of Europe will look on without lifting a finger.

After Bosnia the Serbs appear intent upon taking their Greater Serbian blueprint into Kosovo and Macedonia. In Kosovo, Serbia's southern province, the Serb military is tightening the already tight screws on the ethnic Albanian majority there. Serb president Slobodan Milosevic, who made his name as a communist by stripping Kosovo of its provincial autonomy, is obviously spoiling for a fight that would enable him to homogenise Kosovo as well. The spectre of a Kosovo 'cleansed' of its almost two million ethnic Albanians is nightmarish enough. But any such dramatic escalation of tensions would also certainly bring Albania proper into the picture which, one way or another, will come to the defence of its Kosovar brothers.

Serb nationalists have also set their sights on Macedonia, formerly Yugoslavia's southernmost republic and now an independent state. The fact that Milosevic and his radical supporters consider Macedonia to be 'south Serbia' sits well with neither its Macedonian nor ethnic Albanian inhabitants, much less with neighbouring Greece, Albania and Bulgaria, all of whom have claims on the diminutive Balkan plot. A Serbian offensive in either Kosovo or Macedonia would almost certainly ignite a full-scale Balkan war, dragging in Turkey and parts of the Islamic world too.

The debate over military intervention has bitterly split the Left in Germany as throughout western Europe. Critics argue that alternatives such as harder, strictly enforced sanctions have yet to be exhausted. The German Greens insist that domestic sources of opposition such as the various democratic parties or the peace movements, desperately need western support. They call for yet another conference to bring the warring parties together for negotiations.

The fact is, however, that these options haven't the remotest hope of stopping the slaughter under way now. Tighter sanctions must be applied, and to Croatia as well as Serbia. (Likewise, the arms moratorium against all of Bosnia should exclude the Bosnian army.) A military intervention must also work closely with all democratic forces throughout former Yugoslavia, though particularly with those from Serbia. Once Milosevic and his friends fall from power, the Serbian opposition will hold the key to a lasting Balkan peace. But at present these forces on their own are no match for the nationalist strongmen.

Left opponents of intervention also point to the legacy of western military intervention over past decades, from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf. But in the case of former Yugoslavia, the standard grounds for 'imperialist' intervention, such as empire and markets, simply don't apply in the same way. On the contrary, their absence explains exactly why there hasn't been more forceful intervention to date.

The applicable precedent for intervention in former Yugoslavia is neither Vietnam nor the Gulf War, but World War Two when the allies (also belatedly) joined forces to defeat Nazi Germany. In Serbia, Europe confronts an expansionist, national socialist regime once again, complete with concentration camps and genocidal policies. The Croats, make no mistake, have it in them to be just as ruthless. Europe's present policy of appeasement could well cost it the vision of a peaceful, democratic Europe that flickered so briefly with the end of the Cold War.

Europe's interests in the Balkans are European stability and stemming the flow of refugees. The demise of the Cold War, while leaving the US the unchallenged superpower, also opened the way for independent UN and joint European foreign policy initiatives. The west European leaderships should have taken the lead long ago in former Yugoslavia. But in light of their bickering and the UN's ineffectual interventions. I would have no qualms about the US or NATO stepping in, if that's what it takes.

Military intervention, however, must have specific goals and a solid commitment to laying the foundations for a viable, democratic postwar order. The first goal of intervention must be to end the war in Bosnia and to restore and secure the sovereign borders of Bosnia-Herzegovina under a protectorate. The Bosnian Serb militiants, as well as their Croat counterparts, must be fully disarmed, and demilitarised zones established in Bosnia and other contested regions. All those responsible for war crimes, from politicians and generals to footsoldiers involved in the pillage and plunder, should be tried before an international court and sentenced. Kosovo and Macedonia should also be placed under the umbrella of the UN and new elections called in every former republic.

It is a well-propagated myth that the peoples of former Yugoslavia cannot live together. Every day in the bunkers of Sarajevo, Serb, Croat and Muslim citizens lock arms with their neighbours. They sing and share their last bits of food and live together as they have for the last 40 years. The war in former Yugoslavia is not a popular, ethnic conflict, but a territorial war manipulated from the halls of power and waged by extremists.

Either as a loose confederation or even as independent states, the peoples of the Balkans could coexist peacefully again. Those states, however, must be civic states, based upon equality under citizenship, and not upon superiority according to nationality. They must constitutionally guarantee minority rights, the rights of regional and ethnic autonomy and the integrity of borders. It would be the responsibility of the international community to closely monitor the respect of those rights, taking swift, punitive action against violations.

Decisive international action six months ago could have prevented the war in Bosnia. Once the conflict spills over into neighbouring states, the west will find itself drawn into the Balkan melee anyhow. The longer full-scale intervention is postponed, the more costly and complex it will become.

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