

# THE ANSWER

By John J. Mearsheimer and Robert A. Pape

Three ideas for peace in Bosnia are now conceivable: the fast-fading Vance-Owen plan; the new European proposal to create U.N.-protected "safe havens" for the Muslims; and the much less discussed concept of partitioning Bosnia into three independent states. There's only one constant: the Western powers want peace in the Balkans and don't want to spend much blood and treasure to achieve it. The debate is therefore governed by a judgment of what will work and how much force will be required to achieve it. Within these constraints, partition is the best option: it is the only plan that doesn't deny the reality of what has happened, does not acquiesce in the decimation of the Bosnian Muslims and has a chance of being enforced without a major military embroilment. The Clinton administration should look it over.

Vance-Owen, which is still the West's primary conception of postwar Bosnia, offers nothing but trouble. The plan would leave Bosnia's current external borders intact while ceding power to ten semiautonomous provinces whose borders would be drawn along ethnic lines. Croats, Muslims and Serbs would each dominate three provinces, while the province around Sarajevo would be jointly administered. No group's provinces would be fully contiguous; instead, each would control two contiguous provinces, with a third province geographically separated from the other two. Each province would rule itself, subject to a weak central government comprising representatives from each ethnic group, whose cooperation might well be impossible after the brutal past year.

Vance-Owen would require a two-step military operation: compelling Bosnian Serb withdrawals from seized territories (required because the Serbs now control some 70 percent of Bosnia, while Vance-Owen assigns them only 43 percent), and getting Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats to submit to rule from Sarajevo. Otherwise, the intercommunal slaughter will continue. The first step seems feasible, as we describe later in discussing partition, which requires a similar military oper-

ation. But Vance-Owen's land mine lies in the near impossibility of the second step: bringing power to Sarajevo.

Several factors combine to make this difficult. First, the Bosnian Serb and Croat populations want to join Serbia and Croatia proper. Their submission to Sarajevo must be compelled by force—village by village, street by street, house by house. Whatever army is responsible for bringing about this submission would face endless guerrilla resistance. Second, all three sides are well-trained in guerrilla tactics and well-armed for guerrilla war. Indeed, the military doctrine of the former Yugoslavia stressed such tactics, and the Yugoslav army held large stocks of weapons appropriate for guerrilla war (mines, light machine guns and light mortars). The Serbs, who will resist Vance-Owen most fiercely, inherited the lion's share of these weapons.

Third, the mountainous and heavily wooded terrain of Bosnia is ideal for guerrilla resistance. An American military planner notes that Bosnia is "the most mountainous and inaccessible, fortress-like part of the country"—the region to which the former Yugoslavian army planned to withdraw and wage war against an invader. Those who cite the Gulf war as evidence that we can go into Bosnia with ease should remember that Bosnia resembles Vietnam far more than it does Kuwait. Finally, Vance-Owen would create a weak Bosnian central state that would be too feeble to impose rule with its own forces. Western forces would have to fill this power deficit.

What forces would the West need to overcome these obstacles? Public discussion suggests NATO would need 50,000 to 70,000 soldiers to police a post-Vance-Owen Bosnia, but these numbers are far too low. The Bosnian Serb and the Bosnian Croat populations made up 50 percent of Bosnia's pre-war population of 4.4 million and controlled territory about two-thirds the size of South Vietnam. Together they now field roughly 120,000 armed combatants, many of whom are free from central control. Furthermore, they would see NATO coming and fortify themselves in the most defensible terrain. Large infantry forces would be needed to deal with these indigenous fighters. The NATO troop requirement is difficult to estimate, but we can figure a rough minimum from similar counterinsurgency campaigns.

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A peak commitment of 550,000 American troops was insufficient to defeat Communist forces in Vietnam. German and Italian forces of roughly the same size failed to quell partisan resistance in Yugoslavia during World War II. Earlier, Austria-Hungary needed 200,000 troops to subdue a smaller and less organized Bosnian population in 1878. Thus, a NATO force of 400,000 troops seems reasonable.

Even so, NATO troops are poorly suited for the war they would face—they are best at waging armored war against other conventional armies—and the citizens of NATO countries would likely find the nature of a guerrilla war hard to stomach. Winning such wars depends on intelligence collection. Unfortunately, the best collection techniques violate the laws of war: reconcentration of populations, torture of insurgents. Guerrilla war can be waged without these methods, but civilized tactics impose a high military cost.

For these reasons NATO would be unwise to try to enforce Vance-Owen, even in the unlikely event that the Bosnian Serbs sign it. The price of putting this humpty-dumpty of a multiethnic state back together again would be too great. If NATO takes a crack at the job, its Bosnian stay is likely to be painful and unsuccessful.

Safe havens are also a potential disaster. Under this concept the U.N. would send ground forces to protect six Muslim enclaves—Bihac, Srebrenica, Zepa, Sarajevo, Gorazde and Tuzla—that are now besieged by Bosnian Serb forces. Of the remaining 1.7 million Muslims in Bosnia, 1.2 million now live in the six havens, as residents or refugees. The U.N. forces would expand the perimeters of these areas and take “all necessary measures” to defend them from Serb or Croat attack. Reports say the current U.N. force of 9,500 British, French, Spanish and Canadian troops would be expanded by several thousand to accomplish these goals.

This plan violates a prime law of statecraft: the use of force should be married to a clearly defined political objective. Once the havens are secured, what next? The job of peace-making would be far from finished. Creating havens would leave Bosnia dotted with Muslim enclaves trapped in a hostile Serbian sea. Because they are geographically indefensible (Srebrenica and Zepa are less than ten miles in diameter) and economically unviable, the enclaves could never form the core of a new state, and maintaining them could impose a large military cost on the Western powers. Expanding their size would require costly offensive operations. A further risk is that the Serbs might move the war from the

havens to undefended areas, where nearly 500,000 Muslims reside. This could lead the U.N. either to abandon some Muslims for the sake of others or to expand the havens progressively to include all of Muslim-held Bosnia. Doing the latter would mean raising Western troop levels as well. The plan does a bad job of dividing the responsibility for peace: the U.N. would do too much, the Bosnian Muslims too little. What John Kennedy said of Vietnam should apply to the Muslims: “In the final analysis it is their war.”

A clear partition of Bosnia, while not perfect, is clearly the most feasible solution. Bosnia would be divided into three ethnically homogeneous states. The Croatian and Serbian states would be free to join Greater Croatia and Greater Serbia, respectively; the Bosnian-Muslim state would stand alone as an independent entity. Minority populations trapped behind the new boundaries could move to their new homes under

U.N. auspices.

A lasting solution requires that the Bosnian-Muslim state be militarily and economically viable. It must form a single, compact whole; it cannot be a tiny “leopard spot” state. It must be large enough to pose a substantial obstacle to an attacker and to meet the economic needs of its population. The Bosnian-Muslim state should be centered on Sarajevo and cover a large portion of the eastern half of what was pre-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. The northern border should run from Teslic to Tuzla to the western bank of the Drina River near Loznica, along the northernmost mountain ridge before the Pannonian plain.

The western border should run from Teslic to Zenica to Konjic. This is mountainous terrain, and the Bosna River serves as a fallback line of defense. The southern border should run from Konjic along the Neretva River straight to the Serbian border. The Neretva Valley, with its high ridges, is a strong line of defense. The eastern border should run along the present border between Serbia and Bosnia up to Loznica. Most of this border follows the Drina River.

The remaining territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina would be divided among the Croats and Serbs. The Croats should get one large chunk of territory on the southwestern border of the new Bosnian-Muslim state. This would include most of the two major areas (provinces 8 and 10) awarded to them under Vance-Owen. The Serbs should be given the remainder of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which would include the Bihac and the Bosanska Posavina areas. The Muslims of Bihac (province 1 in Vance-Owen) would move to the new Bosnian-Muslim state, while the Croats in the small

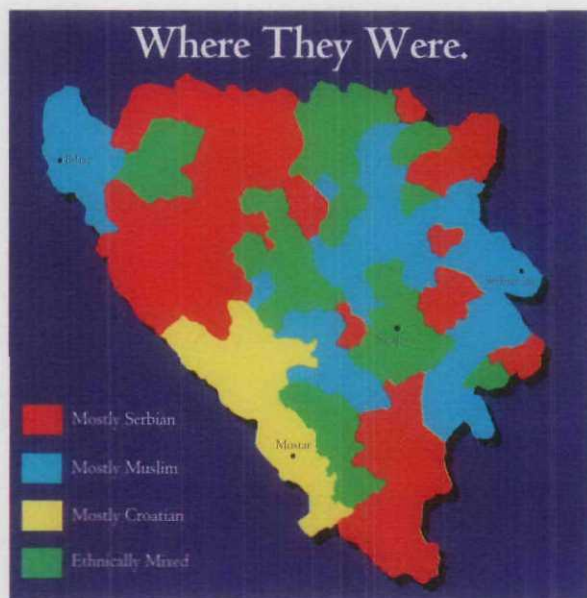


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area of Bosanska Posavina (province 3) would relocate to their new state.

The key territorial trade would be between the Muslims and the Serbs. The Serbs would give up much of their territory in eastern Bosnia (province 6) in return for Bihac (province 1), which the Muslims now control. But the Serbs would still control the southeast and northeast corners of present Bosnia-Herzegovina, and they would have a thirty-five-mile-wide east-west corridor running along its northern border, connecting Serbia proper to the Serbian regions of Western Bosnia and Croatia. Under this plan the Muslims would control about 35 percent (8,000 square miles) of former Bosnian territory; the Serbs, 45 percent (10,500 square miles); and the Croats, 20 percent (4,500 square miles). These percentages roughly reflect the amount of territory each ethnic group controlled in pre-war Bosnia.

How readily would the parties accept such a plan? We cannot tell for sure, because partition has not been widely discussed in public by the rival groups, but we can determine something about their attitudes from their past statements and behavior.

The Bosnian Muslims have shown little interest in partition and have instead argued for maintaining the multiethnic Bosnian state that existed in April 1992, before fighting began. This position was perhaps reasonable in the war's early stages. But a multiethnic Bosnia must now have little appeal for the Muslims after their vast suffering at their neighbors' hands. The Croats are likely to accept partition along the lines we propose, as it would offer them much of the territory they were assigned by Vance-Owen, which they quickly accepted. The Serbs are more likely to balk. Though the plan would help them realize their dream of a Greater Serbia, they would also have to cede substantial territory in eastern Bosnia, including Sarajevo, to the Muslims. This they would likely resist. But if the world powers use enough force and provide sufficient incentives, the Serbs can, we believe, be compelled.

There are three main arguments against partition. First, some would argue that the military means it requires would escalate rather than dampen the violence in Bosnia. We would answer that violence is just as likely to endure. Greater Serbia, if allowed to preside over its conquests, may well be emboldened by its cost-free expansionism to move on elsewhere. Regrettably, there are times when lives can be saved only by threatening to take lives. Second, some would contend that the population transfer required by partition entails needless injury to innocents. Yet transfer is already

occurring. Even Vance-Owen would produce its own population transfers, since minorities would doubtless be driven from areas designated for other groups. Transfer is a fact. The only question is whether it will be organized, as envisioned by partition, or left to the murderous methods of the ethnic cleansers.

Finally, some might complain that partition is incomplete because it fails to solve other related Balkan troubles that could produce future wars—most notably the conflict in Serbia's Kosovo region. There's merit to this. The Serbian government has already begun a slow-motion expulsion of Kosovo's 1.6 million Albanians, and signs abound that it plans a more dramatic and complete cleansing soon. Such a move could trigger a general Balkan war involving Albania, Macedonia and perhaps Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. The West should reiterate that the cleansing of Kosovo will not be tolerated. It might also consider putting Kosovo on the table

as it negotiates with Serbia over Bosnia. Freeing the region could be the price for full peace with the West.

But critical questions remain. How can this settlement be enforced if the Serbs resist? And can it be enforced with an acceptable military cost to the great powers, particularly the United States? We believe the answer to these questions is yes, and that the United States should prepare to lead the alliance into such a strategy.

Two basic military campaigns could be pursued. A "rollback" strategy would use massive military force—supplied simultaneously by Western air forces and Bosnian

Muslim ground forces—to win a decisive victory against the Bosnian Serbs and their Serbian supporters. They would be left with no choice but to accept Western demands. "Coercive bloodletting" is a less ambitious strategy. It would use similar means, but wouldn't depend on decisive victory. Instead, it would present the Serbs with the prospect of a costly war of attrition that would continue until they accepted partition.

In theory, air power can be used three different ways: to decapitate an opponent's leadership, to punish an opponent's population or to weaken an opponent's military forces. Of these, only the last stands a chance at being effective, but only if it is applied in conjunction with ground power.

Decapitation—an approach used in Desert Storm—would involve strikes against Serbian leadership in Bosnia and Serbia proper. The strategy has the advantage of requiring relatively few sorties over a few days by precision aircraft (mainly F-117s) against key leadership and telecommunication facilities. Decapitation raids

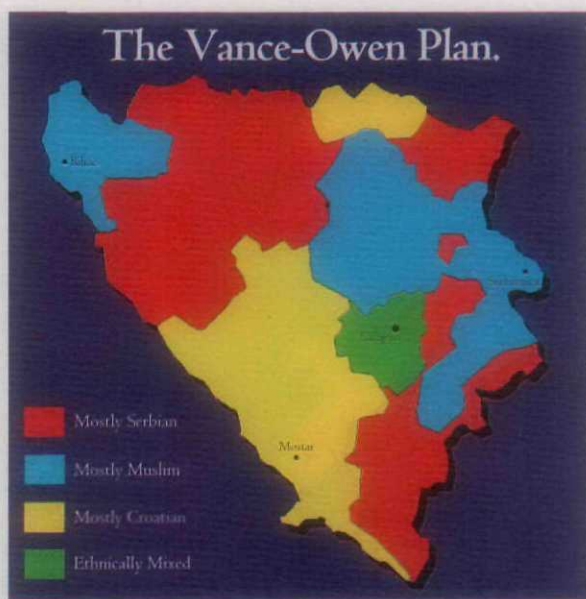


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would also cause little collateral damage, given accurate target intelligence. But finding and targeting the key Serb leaders from the air would be very difficult. U.S. troops took days to find Manuel Noriega after the Panama invasion, and they were hunting him on the ground. Furthermore, killing the key Serbian leaders (Radovan Karadzic and Slobodan Milosevic) probably wouldn't moderate Serb policies since extremist currents run strong in both communities. Cutting communication links is also impractical and would have little effect even if accomplished. Bosnian Serb forces simply have too many ways to communicate with their leaders; and this body can fight even without its head.

The second strategy, aerial punishment, would attempt to inflict enough damage on economic targets that Serbian civilians would compel their leaders to withdraw from their occupied lands. While most of Bosnia's economy is already in ruins, the Serbian standard of living could be substantially reduced by a short air campaign. Serbia's meager air defenses would be destroyed first; F-117s, F-111s, F-15Es, F-18s, F-16s, A-6s and Tomahawk cruise missiles would then knock out its electric power grids, oil refineries and food distribution system. In all, several hundred targets would be attacked. With good weather, the campaign might take less than two weeks.

But punishment is unlikely to cause the Serbs to abandon their Bosnian conquests. Air attacks generate more public anger against the attacker than the target. Air power slaughtered British, German and Japanese civilians in World War II; threatened Egyptian civilians in the 1970 "war of attrition" with Israel; and depopulated large parts of Afghanistan in the 1980s. In each case, the citizenry did not turn against its government. Moreover, Westerners concerned about the Balkan situation for mainly moral reasons would shrink from using such indiscriminate means against noncombatants. Finally, the opponent most vulnerable to aerial punishment—Serbia proper—is not the opponent the West most needs to coerce. Even if Belgrade agrees to press the Bosnian Serbs for withdrawals, it is not clear that they would obey.

The third strategy—weakening the Serbian army to the point where Bosnian Muslim ground troops can force its withdrawal—offers the best chance of success. This air campaign might include three sets of targets: the Serbian army in Serbia, the 35,000-man Bosnian Serb conventional army and the 35,000 Bosnian Serb irregulars. Of these three, the Serbian conventional

army in Serbia proper is the easiest to track. It is concentrated in bases and armed with heavy weapons that can be found from the air. But destroying this army would only reduce Serbia's ability to *reinforce* its forces in Bosnia; it would do nothing to weaken them directly.

The Bosnian Serb conventional armies present a more important target, and they can be destroyed from the air if conditions are right. Since they seem to operate in small mobile units of about 500 men and are constantly on the move, they need to be forced into a concentration to be made vulnerable. (Air strikes could not destroy Iraqi Scuds in open desert. The odds of finding smaller artillery pieces that can be hidden in forests and mountains are even worse.) How do we do this? Engage them in ground action that forces them to gather in one place. If they fought a large, well-armed land army, they would have to mass in far larger numbers. They would then present a target that could be shattered from the air.

Bosnian Serb irregulars would be more difficult to strike from the air. These forces operate in tiny groups of 100 or fewer and rely on mortars and light arms to do their dirty work. This makes them hard to find and difficult to distinguish from Muslim and Croat fighters. On the other hand, these attributes make them a minor factor in the larger military equation.

Air power, in short, can help compel Serbian withdrawals by damaging the Bosnian Serb regular forces. But all this depends on the Bosnian Serbs facing a powerful, well-armed ground opponent. The Bosnian Muslims,

not the Western powers, must supply these forces. To do this, the West is going to have to give them heavy weapons and provide training.

The Bosnian Muslims have been losing territory for lack of weapons, not troops. The total Bosnian Muslim population exceeds the Bosnian Serb population by at least 300,000. However, the Muslims can now arm only some 50,000 soldiers, while the Bosnian Serbs have 70,000 well-armed troops. What's more, the Serbs have 1,500 artillery pieces, tanks and other armored vehicles. The Bosnian Muslims have fewer than 50.

Western military assistance to the Bosnian Muslims would equalize the balance. Weapons could be delivered on C-130 transport aircraft; these can use short, primitive airstrips and can therefore operate from a number of fields and roads in Muslim-held Bosnia. The C-130s could deliver light infantry weapons—rifles, mortars, shoulder-launched anti-tank weapons, night vision devices, machine guns, mines—and also heavier weapons,

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including 105mm and 155mm artillery pieces. When airfields are not available, these weapons could be air-dropped. There's no need to use Croatian-held territory to transfer these goods. In a matter of months the Muslims would have 80,000 soldiers armed to the teeth and able to stop a Serbian offensive in its tracks.

Giving the Bosnian Muslims an offensive capability is more difficult for two reasons. First, the Muslims probably would need self-propelled artillery, tanks and armored personnel carriers, which require the giant C-5 transport aircraft, which in turn requires a long landing strip. Muslim-controlled Bosnia has only three such strips—Sarajevo, Bihac and Tuzla—and none is secure from Serbian anti-aircraft fire. So the heavy weapons would have to be brought into Bosnia over Croatian-controlled land routes, and it's likely the Croats would grant passage reluctantly. Second, the Bosnian Muslims have little experience using heavy weapons or conducting offensive operations. It would take a few hundred Western advisers and about two years after we begin arming them for them to become proficient.

This strategy would take time. The Muslims would require perhaps a year to halt further Serb gains and consolidate their defensive positions before they could move to compel Serb withdrawals. The West should therefore adopt a two-phase plan—protecting Muslim consolidation in the first, compelling Serb withdrawals in the second. The choice between rollback and coercive bloodletting could be deferred until the second phase. In the first phase the West would organize, train and equip the Muslim forces for defensive operations. A fleet of about 100 C-130s would ferry arms to the Muslims, while several hundred fighter and ground attack aircraft stand ready in Italy and on aircraft carriers in the Adriatic to destroy any large Serb offensives. The West would deploy 200 to 400 Special Operations Forces in Bosnia to assist its air operations by serving as ground spotters and to help the Muslims develop a command and intelligence apparatus.

In the second phase, the West would prepare the Muslims for offensive operations and support these from the air. The Serbs now have some 350 main battle tanks, 200 light armored vehicles and 1,000 artillery pieces. A coercive bloodletting strategy could be launched when the Bosnian Muslims have acquired a roughly equivalent ground force. A rollback strategy would have to wait until the Muslims assembled ground forces around twice the combat power of Serb ground forces.

Diplomatic and economic incentives should be

joined to these military punishments. As its main reward, the West should offer to recognize Greater Serbia if the Serbs cooperate with the Western program. The Western powers should also promise to lift economic sanctions and perhaps even to help rebuild the Serbian economy.

Once a peace agreement is signed, populations would have to be moved in order to create homogeneous states. The international community should oversee and subsidize this population exchange. Specifically, the U.N. should establish a Balkan Population Exchange commission, modeled after the League of Nations-sponsored Refugee Settlement Commission, which managed the transfer of more than 1.5 million people between Greece and Turkey from 1923 to 1931. This commission should secure safe passage for immigrants, establish a bank to help them buy and sell property and administer a Balkan Marshall Fund to assist the development of new housing and industry in immigration zones. The commission should have a ten-year mandate: two years for resettlement, eight years for economic development.

How can the long-term survival of the Bosnian-Muslim state be guaranteed? It would inevitably be weaker than its neighbors. Population is a good indicator of latent military power. Allowing for the return of refugees, there are roughly 9 million Serbs, 4.5 million Croats and maybe 1.8 million Bosnian Muslims. There are also some 5.3 million Albanians in the region: of these, 1.6 million live in the Serbian region of Kosovo,

400,000 in Macedonia and 3.3 million in Albania proper. Thus, Serbia would be the strongest state in the region and the Bosnian-Muslim state would be among the weakest.

The NATO powers should therefore undertake to arm it well. They should also issue a security guarantee, promising to intervene with air power if its neighbors attack. NATO should also foster a defensive alliance between the Bosnian-Muslim state, Croatia and Albania. Those states are neither friends of Serbia nor strong enough to check it alone. They should have good reason to ally themselves with the Bosnian Muslims.

This partition plan isn't perfect; and it isn't morally pure. It means transferring hundreds of thousands of civilians from historic homes and countries. It means risking a small number of American lives. But it is the only plan that's realistic about what can be achieved in such a fraught area and idealistic about the principles at stake. And it can be done. •

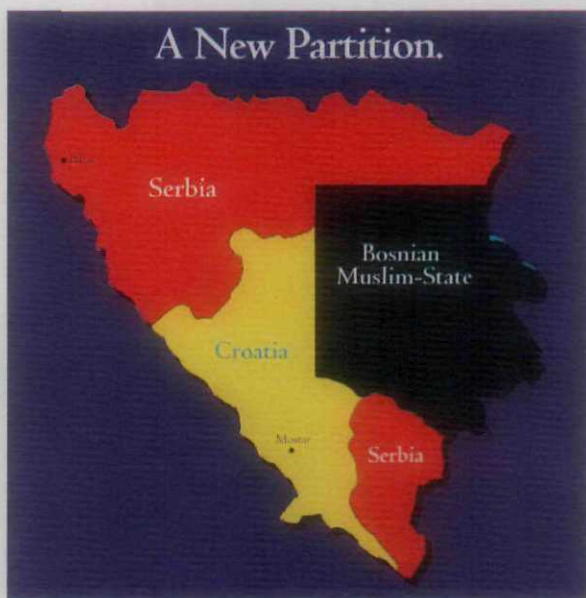


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