

with some vestige of honour from this increasingly messy situation.

Assuming it is now too late to prevent Milosevic from achieving his objectives in Kosovo, NATO will be left with the options of continuing the air campaign for the foreseeable future, escalating the war to include the use of ground forces, or seeking a political compromise.

NATO and the Americans seem to favour the first course of action. This would reinforce failure, leave the initiative to Milosevic and assume the continuing unity of the alliance. But success would still not be guaranteed.

The second option, while making military sense, having moral right on its side, still seems to be ruled out by most of the contributing countries; they are either too worried about the possibility of military casualties or do not believe they have armies properly equipped or trained to fight a ground offensive in Kosovo. Such an option would also require the presence of combat troops on the ground for many years.

Most armies have been drastically reduced in size since the end of the cold war, and it is unlikely that they could undertake the sort of commitment still being met in South Korea by the American army almost 50 years after the Korean war ended. At present levels of operational deployment, tour intervals in the British Army are

less than 12 months. This is unsustainable even in the short term.

The third and, in my view, the most likely option is that NATO will agree a political compromise through the mediation of the Russians and the UN. It would meet some, but not all of Milosevic's political aspirations. With his typical ruthlessness, he would probably judge that by ceding part of Kosovo to the Albanians he would be ridding Serbia of a big problem for ever.

The long-term benefits of this would greatly outweigh the loss of territory that a partition would imply.

He has done so before: in 1994 he struck a secret deal with Franjo Tudjman to quit Krajina in return for an early end to the war in Bosnia.

Whatever the outcome of the war, NATO cannot continue to ignore the fact that it has suffered a strategic defeat. It cannot go on using words to conceal the absence of a suitable exit strategy from the increasingly counterproductive war in which it is now involved. Above all, it is worth reminding the political and military masters of Shea, who recently described life in Kosovo as 'nasty, brutish and short', that Thomas Hobbes also wrote that words were 'the money of fools'.

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