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Anthony Borden and Zoran Pajic fear the Balkan pact will mean nothing on the ground

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BODY:

EXPECTATIONS over yesterday's signing of the Geneva settlement by the parliament of the so-called Serbian Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina are misplaced. Whatever the deliberations of this most debased and illegitimate of political bodies, it is time for the UN and EC to change their Balkans policy.

The problems with the agreement brokered by peace conference chairmen Cyrus Vance and Lord Owen are huge. There is no cause to have confidence in the signature of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic. There is also little reason to claim, as Vance has done, that in pressuring Karadzic to sign, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic has undergone a conversion to Balkan peace-maker.

But the biggest weakness of the agreement is on the ground. The outlines of the proposed "10-provinces plan" recognise the war gains by both Serb and Croat extremists. A peace on these terms could never be stable as disgruntled forces will continue to fight over disputed territory, especially the Croat-designated northern province of Bosanski Brod, which blocks the Serb extremists' central war aim of creating a land corridor from Serbia to their stronghold in Banja Luka and portions of which Bosnian forces have pledged to contest.

Expectations are further tempered by the little-reported but unsurprising fact that the parties in Geneva have only signed the first of the settlement's three provisions, regarding the general principle that no states should be created within the state of Bosnia. The crucial sections on the maps themselves and on the specifics of the structure of the new constitution are still not agreed.

Most fundamentally, the provinces' designations as Serb, Croat or Muslim contradict the negotiators' claim that these areas can be multi-ethnic. In fact, the provinces are little more than variations on the widely discredited "cantonisation plan" of former EC peace conference chairman Lord Carrington. These provinces will likely lead to further large-scale displacements, as minority populations will flee.

Whatever political resolutions emerge over the next few weeks, the international community must adopt a broader and longer-term view of the Balkans. A new approach would mean comprehending extreme ethnic politics not as



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an inevitable result of historic animosities and post-communist transformation but as deliberately manufactured politics by vicious populist leaders on all sides. It would mean spending as much time and political capital locating and nurturing forces for progressive civil politics as has been expended identifying primary individual culprits.

While Milosevic and Karadzic have become internationally isolated, the focus of the peace process as a warlords' convention has in fact served to legitimise these leaders at home as the sole representatives of their respective ethnic notions. Milosevic certainly deserves the bulk of the blame, but the attention on him has distracted attention from the less explicitly vicious but no less chauvinistic regime of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman.

It has also prevented a proper understanding of the culpability of the Bosnian Muslim party, which originally supported cantonisation (and is now facing severe questioning from many Bosnians for signing the 10 provinces plan) and portions of which have also exhibited extreme intolerance.

A positive Balkan policy does not necessarily mean a massive guns-blazing Western intervention. Concrete steps could include supporting the beleaguered independent media throughout the region, which is opposing the propaganda of war and hate; restoring basic communications; nurturing moderate forces, including official recognition of the many opposition figures and non-governmental peace, human-rights and other professional organisations that have refused to become ethnic protagonists; increasing and improving the provision of humanitarian aid and establishing a comprehensive European policy on accepting refugees; naming names, through a permanent and forceful war-crimes tribunal; blocking the southern Balkan war, by deploying much increased numbers of international monitors and by recognising - and substantially reinforcing - the tense state of Macedonia; and enforcing existing agreements, including the no-fly zones and sanctions, without which few in the region will have confidence in more complex tasks the UN may have to undertake.

If the peace process does not bring immediate results, the UN should militarily relieve Sarajevo. The siege by Serbian extremists aims not only to destroy the seat of the central government but also to destroy the historic example of multi-culturalism and existence the capital (still) represents.

Sarajevo is an irrefutable contradiction of the claims of Karadzic that the south Slav people cannot live together. Liberating the city (which some military planners argue could take less than 24 hours) offers the perfect political aim of interventions that has been so elusive.

Finally, the UN must help the refugees and must consider establishing an international protectorate over the whole of the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Refugees have not been the result of the war but its explicit aim - the means by which division and conquest have been achieved. The UN must create conditions for their return, or it should declare Serbia and Croatia the victors and help them to the spoils. Lord Owen has committed himself to the "reversal of ethnic cleansing".

If this is to be achieved, the UN must establish a long-term protectorate, to oversee disarmament of all forces, protect refugees and minority rights, and administer civil affairs.



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A protectorate is the only way to repair the fiction that the Vance/Owen plan does not represent the de facto ethnic division of Bosnia. It would be expensive and dangerous. But no more so than a renewed Serb-Croat war, a fresh southern Balkan conflagration, or the likely spread of the disease of nation-based states further eastward.

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