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Bihac: Implications of the Worst Case Scenario

The Nightmare Scenario

Fighting in the Bihac pocket threatens to spark a worst case scenario that could reignite the war in Croatia. In this event, Serbia probably would support both the Krajina and Bosnian Serbs.

In our vision of the worst case, the Bosnian Serb Army, assisted by Krajina Serb forces, presses its counterattack in the Bihac area, threatening the survival of the Bosnian Government's Fifth Corps. Zagreb has concluded that the prospect of a Serb takeover of the Muslim enclave would significantly harm Croatia's prospects for retaking the Krajina and it probably would launch its own offensive against the Krajina Serbs near the Bihac area.

Implications of the Worst Case

A Widened War

1. **End near term prospects for Croatian peace talks based on the Zagreb-4 plan, or on ICFY efforts to negotiate confidence-building-measures through the reestablishment of economic links.**
2. **Dramatically increase the likelihood of full-scale renewed warfare in Croatia.** Although Zagreb might hope to keep the fighting localized, the Krajina Serbs have threatened to retaliate against Croatian strikes with missile attacks against Zagreb. The Serbs might also choose to try to distract Zagreb by counterattacking Croatian forces in other parts of the country. If Zagreb made quick gains in the Bihac area, it might become emboldened to strike elsewhere.
3. **UNPROFOR would scramble to redeploy its forces or withdraw from Croatia and look to Washington for help.** If the war spread quickly in Croatia or expanded significantly in Bosnia, Allied troop contributors would expect US involvement on the ground to assist them in extricating their forces.
4. **Cement the Bosnian Serb and Krajina Serb military partnership.** The two Serb factions have long discussed combining forces, and a major battle in the Bihac area that drew in the Croats would finally give them a common cause. The Bosnian Serbs would be tempted to attack vulnerable Croat forces in Bosnia to punish Zagreb for its assaults against the

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Krajina Serbs. These forces probably would be particularly vulnerable since the help they have received from the Croatian Army would probably be redirected to the fighting in the Krajina. []

5. **Increase Zagreb's demand for weapons.** Zagreb might be more willing to permit Bosnian Government forces to receive heavy weapons in order to increase its own imports. []

6. **Increase Zagreb's interest in a military alliance with the Bosnian Government.** If Zagreb adopts the war option in Croatia, it will need the Bosnian Government's cooperation to distract the Bosnian Serbs from lending their full support to the Krajina Serbs. Moreover, Croatia will have to trust the Bosnian Government not to renew its attacks against Bosnian Croat forces while Zagreb is preoccupied with the Krajina Serbs. Although the Bosnian Government has long pressed for an alliance with the Croats--and would be grateful for Zagreb's intervention in the Bihac area--the partnership would face early strains as the two groups struggle to define a common military strategy and tactics. []

Milosevic's Ability to Manuever is Reduced

1. **Dramatically increase domestic pressure on Milosevic to abandon his embargo of the Bosnian Serbs.** Initially, increasing numbers of Serbian "volunteers" and supplies would find their way into Bosnia and Croatia. If fighting in Croatia and Bosnia escalated rapidly, Milosevic would blame the Croats and Muslims for destroying prospects for the Contact Group plan and argue that he has no choice other than to aid his fellow Serbs. []

2. **Renew the adversarial relationship between Belgrade and Zagreb.** Milosevic would appeal to the international community to condemn Croatia's attack, and current hopes for a renewed dialogue between the Serbian leader and Croatian President Tudjman would plummet. []

3. **At a minimum, informal ties between the Yugoslav Army (JA) and the Bosnian and Krajina Serbs would grow.** Severe losses by the Krajina or Bosnian Serbs would lead to a large-scale intervention into the conflict by the JA. []

Refugees Face New Peril

1. **Most of Bihac city's 50,000 inhabitants and many of the 150,000 people in the surrounding enclave would try to flee Serb advances by forcing their way through Serb-controlled territory.** The vast majority probably would attempt to flee through Krajina Serb-controlled areas in order to reach free Croatia. []

2. **Several thousand inhabitants of the Bihac area probably would die.** Many would be caught by the Serb advance, especially if Bosnian Government forces collapsed quickly. Because the likely axis for a Croatian advance on the Krajina would direct fighting along transportation routes that refugees would use to escape the region, deaths among those fleeing to Croatia could also be high. Some of the roughly 30,000 refugees already in the Krajina would face similar threats. Exposure could significantly increase the death count among refugees if their flight occurred during sub-freezing weather. []

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[redacted]**Fissures Grow in the Contact Group and UNPROFOR**

1. Moscow probably would renew its demands for an end to sanctions against Serbia or, with likely support from France and the UK, argue that sanctions should also be imposed against Croatia because Zagreb had abandoned international efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement in the Krajina. [redacted]
2. France, the UK, and Russia would charge that Washington's efforts to lift the arms embargo were instrumental in causing the crisis to escalate. These nations may pressure Washington to retract its decision to stop enforcing the embargo and advocate new efforts to cut the arms flow into Croatia and Bosnia. [redacted]
3. Bonn would look to Washington for help in moderating the Contact Group's position regarding Croatia. If the war in Croatia broadened beyond Bihac, Bonn's sympathy for Zagreb might increase strains within the EU. [redacted]
4. The Bosnian Government would sharply criticize UNPROFOR for allowing another "Gorazde"-style attack on a UN safe area and would renew its campaign for the immediate lifting of the arms embargo. The international press would have a field day with new stories of the ethnic cleansing of another enclave. Depending on its own public relations strategy, Zagreb might appear as the enclave's savior and interest in lifting the arms embargo against Croatia might grow in some quarters, especially Germany. [redacted]

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