

Kosovo: Some Lessons

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ABSTRACT

The US undertook the Kosovo campaign without an appropriate coordinated military plan, for political reasons. The proper basis for Kosovo intervention was a valid strategic concern. Europe needs the US to operate out-of-area: only the US has the aircraft carriers, the lift capacity, the cruise missiles, the overhead reconnaissance capability, and other indispensable components of an out-of-area campaign. These are sensible criteria, which could help frame all debates about NATO intervention. Blair's address on April 22, 1999, offered a proposed doctrine for NATO intervention in non-member countries. It had five parts, and might be described as a NATO Powell Doctrine. "Are national interests involved?" Here, Kosovo qualifies fully as to the underlying reality. The Balkans remain a powder keg. The Vance-Owen Plan of cantonising Bosnia made sense, and should not have been dismissed by Secretary Christopher. The Russians have been essential to a solution. Wherever the Russian troops had been in control, the Albanian refugees would not have gone back, meaning a potentially unstable Macedonia. But with the NATO occupying force in place, NATO could dictate the terms of Russian participation.

The US undertook the Kosovo campaign without an appropriate coordinated military plan, for political reasons. Had we deployed troops on the border at the outset, as we did in the Gulf, this manifestation of resolve would have avoided some of the genocide and ruin that took place after we started bombing. Unfortunately, President Clinton felt too weak politically to mount a ground campaign.

All the US wars in this century, including the Spanish-American war and this one, have been presented to the American people as humanitarian endeavors, to forestall or roll back aggressors. However, the US should in general hesitate before making war on humanitarian grounds. Sometimes our intervention just flattens the landscape, making things worse than the worst case had we not intervened.

Our duel with Milosevic seems to be an example of underrating your opponent. If the outcome of the game means everything to one contestant and much less to another, the contestant most concerned will think of expedients and desperate moves that the one who is less involved will not have worked out in advance. We did not anticipate that moving from diplomacy to force against Milosevic to achieve a humanitarian purpose would result in the same humanitarian catastrophe that we were trying to avoid.

The proper basis for our Kosovo intervention, which needs to be understood, was a valid strategic concern: preventing the flames of war from engulfing the whole area. That was a further good reason to deploy troops early.

We can take some consolation from having whacked Milosevic, however things come out. The next dictator on NATO's periphery will realize that he can't just gobble up a neighboring territory, put his hands in his lap, smile blandly, and hope that everything will blow over. He and his advisors will realize that they run a most serious risk of condign punishment.

A paradox of this war may be the revival of the distracting arid expensive conception of the Western European Union, Europe's "independent defense pillar." Everybody has now seen in action why Europe needs the US to operate out-of-area: only the US has the aircraft carriers, the lift capacity, the cruise missiles, the overhead reconnaissance capability, and other indispensable components of an out-of-area campaign. We are NATO's out-of-area specialists, since for us everything is out-of-area. A pretense to the contrary is whimsy. On the other hand, controversy over the bombing campaign may encourage the French, Germans and others to favor the notion of the independent pillar. This will involve sharply raising all the other members' military expenditures as a share of GNP (now only 60% of ours),¹ switching from a conscript to a professional military, duplicating part of NATO's expensive and highly practical command structure, and many other painful expedients, including a good risk of losing any campaign so undertaken.

One hopes several of the NATO countries—and the US—will recognize from their experience in this war that a major power cannot manage foreign politico-military policy by following domestic polls. Fatal! Only a true leader, with broad strategic understanding and forceful command skills, can manage a major power's foreign policy. In this affair, Britain appeared to great advantage, thanks to Prime Minister Tony Blair's principled and stalwart stand.

Most of the press missed Blair's address on April 22, offering a proposed doctrine for NATO intervention in non-member countries. It had five parts, and might be described as a NATO Powell Doctrine:

1. *Are we sure of our case?* On the one hand, even humanitarian intervention may do more damage than good; on the other, some dictators only respond to force.
2. *“Have we exhausted all diplomatic options?”*
3. *Are there military operations we can sensibly and prudently undertake?* Some military operations for humanitarian purposes are not cost-efficient. Neither Somalia nor Haiti can be called successes.
4. *Are we prepared for the long term?* Both the war and keeping the peace thereafter can take more of a commitment than we expect.
5. *Are national interests involved?* Here, Kosovo qualifies fully as to the underlying reality. The Balkans remain a powder keg. These are sensible criteria, which could help frame all debates about NATO intervention.

No commentator I have encountered has explained the attitude of Milosevic toward the Kosovars: he doesn't consider them real people, just riff-raff. He doesn't necessarily want them dead, he just wants them away, to clear the area for Serbian breathing room. As we have seen in Bosnia, this attitude is not going to change in any short period.

To that extent, the Vance-Owen Plan of cantonising Bosnia made sense, and should not have been dismissed by Secretary Christopher. Ethnic subdividing seems to be occurring spontaneously, and the pattern may surface again in Kosovo, as the Serbs back away from the just rage of the neighbors they had subjected to murder, arson, and rape.

The Russians have been essential to a solution. On Tuesday, June 1, there was a dreadful marathon negotiating session in the Hotel Petersberg, the German government guest house overlooking the Rhine in Bonn, between Ahtisaari, Chernomyrdin, Talbot and their military and civilian advisors. The delegations migrated from room to room, squabbling. A key issue was that the Russians demanded a distinct place for their troops on the ground in the occupation, while Talbot refused. Wherever the Russian troops had been in control, the Albanian refugees would not have gone back, meaning a potentially unstable Macedonia.

The meeting stalled, and Ahtisaari called a break at 4:30 a.m.

At 8:30 a.m., the meeting resumed, and, astonishingly, an agreement was quickly reached. Chernomyrdin yielded—the occupation zone issue would be postponed. But with the NATO occupying force in place, we could dictate the terms of Russian participation. Clever...although the sly coup of suddenly occupying the airport was a deft counter.

Anyway, Yeltsin, probably informed of the impasse, doubtless preferred to cave in and get the credit, rather than have the West force it down his throat at the June 18, G-8 meeting. Yeltsin remains our best hope in Russia, even with the sinister baggage of Berezhevsky et al.

NOTE

- 1 Britain and the US spend about \$200,000 per soldier, versus about \$70,000 for the rest of NATO.