

## Reflections on Kosovo and US Force Structures

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Clearly the menu of U.S. policy choices for Kosovo in March 1999 was not large. With diplomatic discussions along thenongoing lines, the Yugoslav military campaign against the KLA would have succeeded. Whether that outcome would have been acceptable from a humanitarian standpoint may be debated. Or we could (in theory) have mobilized a ground campaign, which, given the topography of the region might have meant a land assault on Serbia proper, for instance from Budapest to Belgrade.

Instead, we constrained ourselves in a number of ways. First, we determined that Yugoslav domination of Kosovo had to end. Second, we decided that for practical purposes no American casualties could be tolerated. And third, we had to act with the forces available, which meant a campaign of aerial bombardment. The result was the 78-day air war.

The air war thus represented a middle ground between ineffective diplomacy and full-scale invasion—a “third way.” The apparent success of that war has now crystallized, in many minds, a particular model of American involvement in world affairs. For many Americans, it is a model of relatively clean, politically achievable projection of power. It is a way of securing national and also humanitarian objectives without interrupting the normal rhythms of domestic political life, and especially without sacrificing our own soldiers.

But for much of the rest of the world the appearance is quite different. For them, it is a model of a country that issues ultimatums and then enforces them with high explosives delivered at long range. That we view our goals as noble, and our soldiers as priceless, is not so important to other people. Let me suggest that we should think very carefully about the implications of this for the American position in the world in the long run.

We will not resolve here arguments about the actual intent of the Milosevic regime in Kosovo, or what would have happened to the civilian population had we refrained from launching the bombing campaign on March 24. Still less can we know how events might have played out in the longer run.

But I think we can evaluate, with some dispassion, the air war itself, and understand for ourselves the nature of this middle course of military action. Proper evaluation of bombing requires some historical context, and that can usefully begin with an austere, rather beautiful document: The United States Strategic Bombing Survey report of October 31, 1945, entitled “The Effects of Strategic Bombing on the German War Economy.” The USSBS study, directed by my father along with such luminaries as Burton Klein, Edward F. Denison and Nicholas Kaldor, is justly famous in the annals of applied economics.

The survey found that, with one important exception, the strategic bombing of Germany had few effects on German war production. Production of aircraft, for instance, peaked in the summer of 1944 when record numbers were on hand. Only the attacks on oil facilities had important effects on the German war effort, until the combined effect of land operations began to cause the collapse of Germany itself.

Why was this? By comparison with later periods the tonnage dropped on Germany was small, and the bombing itself was highly inaccurate. But the fundamental reason, the survey found, lay in the economic possibilities for substitution. There are multiple ways to achieve any given military or production objective, and under pressure it is usually possible to find them.

Now, through the late 1940s and 1950s, we solved the problems of tonnage and accuracy in a fairly straightforward way: by replacing conventional explosives with hydrogen bombs. And we developed strategic bomber forces that were capable of delivering these weapons.

But there were difficulties. First, the weapons were unusable. While some factions in the Air Force notoriously militated for a preventive war against the Soviet Union, the government as a whole realized that the United States could not launch such an attack and one was, in fact, never launched. Later, the strategic nuclear missile and the submarine effectively superseded the bomber for both pre-emptive and retaliatory missions.

Thus the bomber force became again a conventional weapon. And in Vietnam, it again confronted the conventional bombing dilemma. Mobile and military targets are hard to hit. And hitting civilian targets does not win wars against a determined adversary, particularly when, as was true of Vietnam, there were few fixed industrial targets of value. Most of the Vietnamese military supplies came in from China and Russia.

The development of precision-guided weapons, which accelerated during the Vietnam war, aimed at finding a useful role for aerial warfare. Precision-guided weapons were, of course, greatly celebrated during the Gulf War, though we learned later that their actual military role was much less than claimed at the time. No Iraqi Scuds were destroyed during that war, as I understand, and great numbers of Iraqi tanks survived to wreak havoc among the Shi'a of Southern Iraq after the war ended. The precision bombs were mainly useful against civilian infrastructure, as in Baghdad and other cities, where it bore little direct relation to the military operations in and near Kuwait.

### **That Brings us to The Kosovo Operation.**

One can not take seriously the idea that the bombing campaign "ought to have worked" within a few days. Bombing is by nature a cumulative operation. The early blows have little effect. This is particularly true if the campaign is conducted conservatively with a view at first to suppressing return fire, to keeping our aircraft above a safe ceiling, and to minimizing civilian casualties.

It follows that a bombing campaign cannot be calibrated to prevent, forestall, or even much impede, a campaign of expulsion of a civilian population on the ground, such as was launched against the Kosovar Albanians once the bombing started. Implicit in the decision to bomb was a decision to let the humanitarian disaster happen, and to sort out the results afterward.

By the time of Kosovo, our inventory of precision weapons had become quite large, and it was possible to conceive of a prolonged air campaign that relied mainly on them. Yet we found, just as in World War II, Vietnam and Iraq, that the basic problems of aerial bombing against military targets remained. First, there were few fixed military targets to bomb, airfields and barracks, notably. Second, the mobile military targets were small, hard to find, or located in and among civilians. Third, the Yugoslav army was quite adept at providing decoys. At the end of the war, we found we had destroyed only a few dozen tanks and a handful of aircraft, and had caused only a few hundred casualties in the Yugoslav National Army.

That meant, as in earlier cases, the air war was primarily effective because it was, and only to the extent that it was, aimed at the fixed infrastructure of civilian life. We destroyed government office buildings and television stations. We destroyed oil refineries and chemical plants, and we damaged the power grids. We bombed the major automobile factory and other industrial facilities. We destroyed hotels and other business assets belonging to the Serbian elite. We dropped bridges into the water up and down the Danube. We bombed a nation until it

gave up.

We need to face this reality squarely. The bombing of civilian and administrative targets is not incidental to military operations in this kind of warfare. It is the essence of the operation. The campaign is successful only through the political pressure that arises from economic and civilian losses, environmental damage, and the psychological stress that comes from being under bombardment for a long period of time. It is perhaps gratuitous to point out that this type of warfare is plainly illegal under the laws of warfare to which we purport to ascribe.

I would rather ask a milder question. Is it in the U.S. national interest that we continue to be seen by the world as the major architect of this system of warfare? Is it something that we as Americans should support? Do we regard it as reasonable, fair and just? (And would we be prepared to accept it as legitimate if another country decided to retaliate, with the lower-technology, yet equally precision-guided, tactics of car and truck bombs?)

### **This is a Question of Costs and Benefits**

At one level, the benefits of the Kosovo operation are straightforward: it worked, we won, we own the territory. But the value of this benefit really depends on whether one believes that the government and security system now arising, led by the leadership of the KLA, is a real improvement over the Serbs. The evidence for this, so far, is not overwhelming. One finds that claims of genocide before the bombing campaign started were exaggerated, while the new group operates with a brutality against Serbs, Roma and other minorities that does not seem all that different qualitatively from the brutality of the older regime.

At the time, much of American and North European public opinion was persuaded by the comparison of Serb actions to genocide, and also by the shame felt over insufficiently rapid action to prevent carnage in Bosnia. But this was not so in Greece, in Italy, and still less in Russia or other parts of the world not members of NATO. Most of world public opinion felt that Yugoslav actions prior to the bombing were, while brutal, not acts of genocide. And the evidence emerging since the end of the conflict has tended to reinforce this view.

In total, the physical and human costs of the operation were very large. Serbia itself is in ruins, with heavy damage to transport, utilities, the industrial base and energy supplies, as well as scars on the urban landscape. Kosovo is a mess, littered with unexploded cluster bomblets that will cause civilian casualties for years to come. There is human and physical damage: civilian death and injury directly from the bombing, and destruction of Kosovar homes that has to be counted in; it would not necessarily have occurred without the bombing campaign.

When you add all of this together, the claim that the benefits exceed the costs depends on a very strong view of the evil of the Yugoslav regime in Kosovo, of the likelihood of genocide proper occurring in the absence of an actual war in the territory. To the extent that evidence of this is less than persuasive, the relative weight of the costs begins to mount, in comparison.

As I said earlier, at the outbreak of the crisis, the actual choices were quite limited: ineffective diplomacy, full-scale invasion, or the “third way.” At some points, there was no choice, practically speaking, given the objectives we had set for ourselves.

But why was that the case? The answer is, in part, that we have downgraded our capability to use diplomacy effectively, and for that matter our ability to mobilize and deploy ground forces where they might be required, precisely because the “third way” seems to solve many of the thorny problems of projecting power.

But in fact, close examination of every case of strategic bombing seems to reveal that it does not resolve issues that ought to be considered important. Bombing is not, and has never been, effective against well-prepared and mobile military forces. It is only effective as a political and economic weapon against fixed civilian targets. It therefore necessarily entails the random murder of innocents in significant numbers. And it necessarily leaves major economic hardship, environmental destruction, and continuing physical hazards in its place, all of which greatly complicate the problem of post-war reconstruction.

As a thought experiment, suppose we had not had the ability to project our air power over Kosovo and Serbia? In that case, we would have had two options, which could have been pursued at the same time. First, diplomacy. Since there would have been fewer alternatives to diplomacy, we would have had a strong incentive to strengthen and to rely on, rather than weaken and marginalize, the diplomatic institutions and our position in them, notably the United Nations. The fact that the United Nations as it exists was ineffective does not establish the impossibility of effective multilateral institutions. But we don't invest in such institutions because, in part, we think we do not need them.

Second, a military mobilization for a ground invasion. The threshold for this extreme step would have to have been very high. But would that have been, necessarily, a bad thing? Absent an actual campaign to drive the Kosovars from their homes, an invasion would not have been launched. And most Kosovar Albanians would still be in their homes today, instead of desperately trying to rebuild them. Would this have been such a terrible alternative to what actually happened?

In short, let me suggest that it may have been bad national strategy to develop the third way of remote aerial warfare. The point that some military alternatives are best not pursued is not new. We have banned chemical and biological warfare. We have recognized that tactical atomic weapons were too dangerous to use, particularly when positioned close to the front lines. We are moving toward downsizing of the nuclear arsenal itself.

Our current capability to bomb presents similar problems. It tempts us to take a path that is easy on ourselves, but inflicts maximum damage on other people, and that prompts us to neglect our responsibility to win over the candid opinion of the rest of the world before committing our forces to military action.

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