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ASSESSING AMERICA'S MILITARY OPTIONS IN BOSNIA

INTRODUCTION

Many people around the world sighed with relief when they heard that Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic had signed the United Nations peace plan for Bosnia-Herzegovina advanced by Cyrus Vance of the U.N. and Lord Owen of the European Community. They understandably hoped that the carnage in that country finally would come to an end.

But their relief was premature. Despite heavy international pressure, the Bosnian Serb parliament refused to ratify the plan and instead voted to hold a referendum to decide the issue. The Vance-Owen peace plan envisions not only a rollback of Serbian gains inside Bosnia, but a complicated power-sharing arrangement between Croats, Muslims, and Serbs.

In the meantime, the Clinton Administration continues to threaten the use of military force. The President believes that the threat of air strikes encouraged the Bosnian Serbs to sign the peace accord. Now that peace has broken down once again, as it has so often in the past, Clinton may proceed with plans for air strikes against Serbian forces inside Bosnia.

Before Clinton commits the nation to war against Serbia, he needs to state clearly America's stake in the outcome of the conflict. Before U.S. forces are committed, Americans have a right to know exactly which U.S. interests are endangered by the war in Bosnia. By the same token, Clinton needs not only to evaluate America's military goals, but to recommend the appropriate means for achieving them. Absent a clear assessment of both the ends and means of military action in the Balkans, the Clinton Administration will surely find that its actions will be ineffective and unsupported by the American people.

DEFINING U.S. VITAL INTERESTS

What are America's interests in Bosnia-Herzegovina? To be sure, general instability in Europe would threaten U.S. interests, but there is no compelling reason to believe that the conflict in the Balkans will produce this result. Even if the conflict were to spread southward, engulfing Kosovo, a province in southern Serbia inhabited by ethnic Albanians, NATO allies Turkey or Greece most likely would not become militarily involved. But even if they did, there is no reason to think that Europe's general stability would be threatened. There is no major power—not Russia, Germany, or even France—that would try to intervene in the conflict in a way contrary to American interests. The Balkans conflict, therefore, will not adversely affect America's vital interests.

Nor will the Bosnian conflict have any major impact on America's other interests around the world. Proponents of using U.S. force often argue that if the Serbs are not stopped, then other tyrants will be encouraged to slaughter their populations. But the U.S. and its Western allies have no intention of intervening militarily in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan, Tibet, and many other places where atrocities are committed and people are losing their lives. The reason: The U.S. has no vital or even important interests in these places. Last year 30,000 people were killed in the civil war in Tajikistan, but America has no desire to become militarily involved in that conflict. If that is so, then standing up to Serbia may, in fact, send the wrong signal: that America will intervene militarily to stop atrocities around the world when, in fact, it will not.

While intervening militarily in Bosnia serves no vital U.S. interests, a case can be made for intervention on humanitarian grounds. Many Americans advocate the use of force to protect innocent people caught in the brutal grasp of war and "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia. Their concern is understandable. Humanitarianism has always been an element of U.S. foreign policy; nobody should discount its value to the nation as it defends its interests. However, if the peace plan fails and fighting continues, air strikes and arming the Muslims, another course proposed by the White House, will not end the killing in Bosnia. They, in fact, will result in more deaths. U.S. air strikes will certainly (and unintentionally) kill non-combatants without necessarily terminating the war. By arming the Muslims, the U.S. will prolong the conflict as the Muslims try to take back territory wrested from them by force of arms.

ASSESSING U.S. AND SERBIAN GOALS

If the U.S. proceeds with using military force in Bosnia, Clinton's Pentagon planners must develop specific military objectives. These should be designed to establish the point at which the military can declare victory. But when can victory be declared? When the Bosnian Muslims have taken back territory lost to the Serbs? When Serb forces have been completely defeated and all of Bosnia has been pacified? Or could the U.S. settle for yet another peace agreement under which all sides merely pause to take up the conflict another day?

Serbian Goals

In order to develop U.S. military goals, the Clinton Administration must have a proper assessment of Serbian goals. These are clear. The Serbian government and Bosnian Serbs want to establish a Greater Serbia that includes the territory of Serbia proper, Montene-

gro, and Serb-inhabited portions of Bosnia and Croatia. Within this area, however defined, the Serbs aim to be the dominant and controlling ethnic group. Thus, they mean to occupy militarily the territories they covet.

U.S. Goals.

Identifying U.S. goals for a military intervention in the Balkans is more difficult because the Clinton Administration has not adequately defined U.S. interests in Bosnia. Nevertheless, if military force were used, the most likely military objectives would be to:

- ✓ **Stop** the expansion of Serbian military control over remaining non-Serbian parts (roughly 30 percent) of Bosnia.
- ✓ **Prevent** ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.
- ✓ **Preserve** the integrity of Bosnia as an independent state in which all Bosnians—Serbs, Muslims, and Croats—can live in peace.

ASSESSING SERBIAN CAPABILITIES

The next step in defining U.S. military options for the Balkans is to assess the military capabilities of the Serbs. Precise data on the composition of Serbian government and Bosnian Serb forces are difficult to obtain. However, the best estimates in public sources are that the Serbian Army consists of about 135,000 active troops and 400,000 reserve troops. The Bosnian Serb militia consists of about 67,000 soldiers. In addition, the Serbian government forces possess about 1,000 Soviet-built main battle tanks, mostly of the older, Soviet-made T-54 and T-55 variety. They also possess about 1,350 artillery pieces and ten FROG-7 surface-to-surface missile launchers.

Of concern to U.S. air forces, the Serbian government possesses some 240 surface-to-air missile launchers and 350 anti-air guns. Serbian air and naval forces are more modest: 213 ground attack jets, 126 fighter jets, and 136 armed helicopters. The ground-attack jets are of Yugoslavian design. The majority of the fighter aircraft are the Soviet-designed MIG-21 *Fishbed*. Most of the helicopters are French-designed *Gazela* aircraft. The Serbian Navy has 63 ships, not including amphibious and support craft. Most of these are coastal patrol boats. The Serbian Navy has five submarines and is capable of laying mines and launching torpedoes.

U.S. MILITARY OPTIONS

Knowing the size of Serbian forces will enable Pentagon planners to formulate military options. They are:

OPTION #1: Do nothing. The U.S. can decide against taking any military action and to rely on economic and diplomatic sanctions to force the Serbs to end their military campaign and relinquish their goal of creating a Greater Serbia. Such a decision need not be interpreted as tacit approval of Serbian aggression. On the contrary, it could be understood as a recognition of some hard facts: that U.S. military action may not produce the desired outcome, or that it is not worth the risk. The shortcoming of this option, of

course, is that the Serbs may not buckle under the pressure of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation alone. Therefore, while this policy involves virtually no risks, the likelihood of success is likewise limited.

OPTION #2: Air strikes. If the current peace plan fails, Clinton is likely to order air strikes against Serb positions in Bosnia. He has threatened limited air strikes primarily to cut off Bosnian Serb supply lines and to force the Serbians to the negotiating table.

But limited air strikes alone would have little effect on the outcome of the conflict. The widely scattered, highly mobile Serbian forces in Bosnia would be able to take cover against such an assault. Artillery and mortars could be moved and hidden under the cover of the densely wooded mountain terrain. Furthermore, the Serbs would undoubtedly place artillery units near such civilian targets as schools and churches to deter Western attacks. The best that can be hoped for by this approach is that it may slow the pace of the Serbian campaign.

OPTION #3: Contribute to a peacekeeping operation. This option depends on whether the Serbs fully accept the U.N. peace plan. If they do, NATO planners envision a multinational peacekeeping force comprising as many as 60,000 troops. Included in this force would be 12,000 American combat troops from the First Armored Division, based in Germany, plus around 2,000 Marines and 3,000 Army paratroopers. This force could be augmented, resulting in a total U.S. commitment of 20,000 troops.

Before the U.S. commits its forces to a U.N. peacekeeping operation, Clinton should, of course, anticipate what the peacekeeping mission is supposed to achieve. A U.N. peacekeeping force should not be intended to impose a peace settlement. Peace depends on the good faith of all parties. The U.N. has 15,000 so-called peacekeepers in the Balkans now. While they have conducted heroic humanitarian relief operations, their activities cannot be described as peacekeeping. The war continues to rage around them. These soldiers are taking enormous risks, while contributing little to the process of halting Serbian aggression. This is not their fault. They are the victims of a policy typical of the U.N., which puts hope and ambition ahead of prudence and realism.

Furthermore, a U.N. peacekeeping operation would be incompatible with more aggressive military options. Peacekeepers assume their position as a buffer force on the basis of neutrality between warring parties. If the U.N. was reckless in putting troops in Bosnia prior to a settlement, leaving them there while the U.S. conducted U.N.-authorized air strikes against Serbian positions would constitute nothing less than a death sentence for some of these troops. If U.S. military action, in the name of the U.N., were to imply political support for one side—in this case the Muslims—then the peacekeeping mission will have been transformed into one of imposing a peace settlement on the Serbs.

Trouble for the U.N. peacekeeping forces undoubtedly will arise when they try to disengage Serbian forces from regions they occupy, or when the U.N. tries to disarm the Bosnian Serbs. If Serb forces in the field fire on U.N. peacekeepers, either because they are breaking with their leaders who want peace, or because they and their leaders never intended to surrender in the first place, the U.N. peacekeeping forces will be left with the unhappy task of either attacking Bosnian Serb positions or withdrawing from the conflict altogether.

OPTION #4: Arm the Bosnian Muslims. The fourth option is to provide the Bosnian Muslims with the means to defend themselves. The Bosnian Muslims are both outnumbered and outgunned by their Serbian opponents. Nevertheless, with proper support they could slow, if not halt, the Serbian advance. This option would require virtually no commitment of U.S. troops to the Balkans. Such a plan would be similar to that which the U.S. followed in the 1980s while supporting anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan and anti-communist forces in Angola. This would be a variant of the Reagan Doctrine formulated to counter communist insurgencies in the Third World. The purpose of this policy: stopping the Serbs from controlling all or most of Bosnia, and after a military stalemate had been achieved, creating the conditions for a viable Bosnian state in which Serbs, Muslims, and Croats could live peaceably.

There are a number of serious problems and risks associated with rearming the Muslims. The British and French oppose it because they fear Serbian retaliation against their troops, which are currently deployed with the U.N. peacekeeping force in Bosnia. Therefore, if this option is to be taken seriously, the Clinton Administration would have to recommend first pulling out all U.N. forces from Bosnia. But doing this would entail an end to the humanitarian relief effort sponsored by the U.N. Thus, arming the Muslims would be tantamount to abandoning the humanitarian mission of the United Nations.

The result would surely be a prolongation of the war in Bosnia. Presumably, the Muslims would use their newly acquired arms to roll back Serbian gains. This would take time and would inflict casualties on all sides. Muslim forces undoubtedly would commit atrocities against the Serbs and even the Croats, which would contradict the original humanitarian intent of the intervention. By backing the Muslim cause, the U.S. would be identified not only with Muslims' political objectives, but with their military tactics as well.

OPTION #5: Establish a security zone in Bosnia. The fifth option is for the U.S. and allied forces to establish a security zone for Bosnian Muslims inside Bosnia. The precise dimensions of such a zone would have to be carefully drawn. Within this zone the U.S. and allied forces would establish total control. The creation of the zone would establish a firm line against further Serbian aggression, provide immediate relief to the Muslims within the zone, and establish the foundation for a future Bosnian state. It would achieve these goals without requiring the massive military commitment required to roll back the Serbs.

Under this plan, U.S. and other NATO troops would be allowed to conduct offensive operations against the Serbs if they threatened to undermine the security of the zone. As many as 100,000 ground troops would be needed, plus another 100,000 naval and air forces deployed throughout the entire region (theater of operations). The operation would be deemed successful and U.S. troops could leave only when Bosnia's forces could assume the defense of the perimeter themselves. Again, this option would require the withdrawal of U.N. peacekeeping forces from contested areas and the end to the existing negotiations. All forces would be commanded by NATO, with authorization from the U.N.

Some will argue that this plan tacitly rewards Serbian aggression. The reason: The sanctuaries for the Muslims would be drawn from the existing territories which they currently control. This arrangement would favor the Bosnian Serbs who have taken much land from the Muslims. Moreover, it runs the risk of seeing several Muslim outposts cut off from the security zone; these are in isolated areas unlikely to fall within the zone. Finally, it assumes Bosnian Muslim acquiescence. This is because the ultimate success of this approach assumes that the Muslims eventually will provide for their own defense.

OPTION #6: Roll back Serb forces through a direct assault. The final option is one that closely resembles Operation Desert Storm. It would seek to wrest control of Bosnian territory from the Serbs in the same way that allied forces liberated Kuwait from Iraqi forces in the Persian Gulf War. Such an operation would require some strikes against Serbia proper in order to destroy the Serbian command and control network and supply lines. This would be a truly massive operation. It would take perhaps as many as 500,000 U.S. and other allied troops. Further, the terrain would not be an open desert, ideally suited for a precision bombing. The U.S. could expect a tough campaign, one that would require a heavy reliance on ground forces and would result in a considerable number of American casualties. The Clinton Administration, for good reason, has ruled out this sort of operation.

CONCLUSION

If the U.N. peace plan is never accepted by the Bosnian Serbs, Clinton may employ military force against Serb forces inside Bosnia. This can be particularly risky for two reasons. The first is that no vital U.S. interests are at stake in Bosnia. Therefore, the White House will have grave difficulties in defining political and military objectives around which the Congress and the American people can rally. If a military operation fails or is very costly, Clinton will stand accused of launching a poorly planned and risky war.

The second reason is that if the war continues, there is no limited military option—whether air strikes or rearming the Muslims—that can achieve the humanitarian goal which the President and other advocates of military force favor: a cessation of the killing and the “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia. The killing could, in the end, be stopped, but doing this may require a large contingent of U.S. ground troops to back up a U.N.-sanctioned war against Bosnian Serb forces and possibly Serbia itself. Neither Clinton nor anyone in Congress, however, favors this option.

Facing these undesirable choices, Clinton should drop the humanitarian mission and restate U.S. policy goals in terms of U.S. strategic interests in Europe. Therefore, America’s objective would be to prevent the Serbs from completely dominating Bosnia, while containing Serbian aggression against Albanians in Kosovo. The strategic purpose would be to avoid the further destabilization of the Balkans and Southeast Europe. The purpose would not be to make peace or to restore Serbian-occupied territory to the Bosnian Muslims. The logical military option to achieve this goal would be to provide the Muslims with arms and military advisors. Muslims forces would be a counterforce against Serbian expansionism, and while the war would be prolonged, it nonetheless would not likely spread beyond the borders of Bosnia.

Therein, of course, lies the political cost for Clinton. Not only would America's European allies, particularly Britain and France, oppose arming the Muslims, taking this course of action also could mean redefining and possibly even sidestepping the U.N. peacekeeping process. The U.S. could not simultaneously side with the Muslims and support a supposedly neutral peacekeeping force sponsored by the United Nations. The U.S. could try to gain U.N. and NATO approval of a plan to arm the Muslims but this, of course, would meet stiff resistance from the Europeans. Moreover, the U.S. would be saddling itself with the Muslim cause and committing America to support a likely protracted war in the Balkans.

None of these options is good. If they were, they would have been tried long ago. Yet, if the peace process breaks down completely and the war continues in Bosnia, one of them will have to be chosen. Americans deserve to know what the President hopes to achieve. There has been a lot of talk in Congress and the White House about military options, and too little discussion of America's ultimate objectives. It is time for Bill Clinton to explain to the American people what his political and military strategies are and how this ancient Balkan conflict threatens U.S. interests.

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