44. *The Balkan Thicket*

Congress should

- call for the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Bosnia;
- refuse to appropriate funds for any further deployment of U.S. troops to Bosnia;
- urge the members of the European Union to expand their military presence in Bosnia, if they deem Bosnian stability important to their own interests;
- seek to reverse plans for the expansion of NATO or for NATO "out-of-area" operations; and
- urge the administration to reverse Washington's growing military and intelligence ties to Croatia, Albania, and other states in the Balkans.

For five years Bosnia has dominated the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Over that period the United States has. committed enormous levels of political, diplomatic, military, and financial resources to the Balkans. Those commitments continue today in the form of the deployment of American military forces in the region and in pledges of financial support for the reconstruction of Bosnia.

At the beginning of 1997 there is still no certainty that that huge investment of time and effort will produce a stable settlement. One important lesson for post-Cold War foreign policy has, however, become unambiguously clear: disorder in Europe has an awkward habit of leading to U.S. engagement irrespective of considerations of national interest or the weight of public opinion.

Unfortunately, in the case of Bosnia, the strategic necessity to treat European security issues soberly was forgotten. A similar carelessness threatens to distort the lessons of the Bosnian experience. Bosnia is not, as many claim, a NATO-led success that paves the way for the United

States to take on new and costly commitments in Europe through an expansion of NATO. The real lessons lead in the opposite direction. To secure its interests in Europe, the United States, in concert with the West European powers, should devise credible and effective security structures under which Europeans take responsibility for safeguarding the stability of their region without direct U.S. intervention.

Bosnia: 1991-95

The most regrettable aspect of the Bosnian tragedy was that it was to a great extent avoidable. Despite historical and ethnic complexity, the essential elements of the Bosnian conflict were not hard to understand. They reflected a wish on the parts of the peoples of the constituent republics of the former Yugoslavia to form new states in which Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Muslims, and Macedonians, respectively, would dominate the organs of government.

In Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia that process was accomplished with varying degrees of difficulty. Bosnia, where no ethnic group represented a majority of the population, presented a geometric leap in the degree of challenge. An independent Bosnia based on a unitary central government would have turned both Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats into minorities and was therefore unacceptable to them. Both Serbs and Croats made that fact clear in early 1990, well in advance of the outbreak of fighting in April 1992.

In the early stages of the Bosnian crisis, the European governments took the lead in the search for a solution, proposing a "cantonal" division of Bosnia under which the various ethnic groups would exercise local autonomy under a loose central government. The United States opposed that solution but did not have an alternative plan of its own. The Clinton administration appeared indecisive, at times arguing that vital American interests were at stake, on other occasions insisting that they were not.

There then followed a two-year interval of ill-concealed intra-NATO disarray. In general, U.S. policymakers favored the use of airpower to reverse Serb territorial gains, while the Europeans, who provided the main part of the UN peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, were reluctant to expose their forces to retaliation. They favored diplomatic means, using economic sanctions to pressure President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia to force the Bosnian Serbs to make concessions. Meanwhile, the Serbs continued to control about 70 percent of Bosnia's territory.

Behind the scenes, however, an important change in the balance of power was taking place. In February 1994 the United States brokered a federation between Bosnian Croats and Muslims—and a loose confederation between Croatia and Bosnia—and a significant volume of arms, some from Iran, began to flow to the federation. By early 1995 the federation had gained enough strength to take advantage of Serb military overextension in eastern Bosnia and launched a counteroffensive. Serb-held areas in Croatia and western Bosnia were quickly retaken, causing massive flows of Serb refugees into Serbia. The Serb share of Bosnian territory slipped back to about 50 percent. The Muslim-Croat federation was resurgent, and the Serbs were forced to contemplate the prospect of defeat. That reversal of military fortunes set the stage for a political compromise.

The Dayton Agreement

The agreement reached at Dayton, Ohio, in November 1995 was in every sense a compromise. It was also a highly ambiguous document, allowing each side to emphasize the elements it liked and to disregard those it regarded as unpalatable. The agreement contained detailed provisions on military issues (cease-fire, disengagement of forces, withdrawal of weapons, etc.) but was crucially vague on measures to implement the civilian side of the agreement (elections, return of refugees, voter registration, war crimes trials, etc.). It also postponed consideration of some of the more contentious issues (land corridors linking various sectors of the ethnic political entities, for example). It should be no surprise, therefore, that military implementation has proceeded far more smoothly than civilian aspects of the agreement. Nor should it be any surprise that long-term stability in Bosnia is far from ensured.

The central ambiguity of the Dayton accord concerned the very issue over which the war had been fought: the relationship between the central government of Bosnia and the constituent ethnic communities. The agreement calls for a federal structure with a single international personality and a single currency. At the same time, however, it legally acknowledges the separate existence of the Serb and Croat political entities and holds out to them the prospect of forming "special parallel relationships" with neighboring states, that is, Serbia and Croatia. It may be seen, therefore, that while the official outcome of the Dayton negotiations was that Bosnia should emerge as a unitary state, the door was also left open to partition.

Future U.S. Policy

The single greatest positive achievement of the Dayton agreement was to bring the large-scale conflict to an end and to provide the conditions in which elections (albeit flawed) were possible. Nevertheless, given that the differences between the Bosnian parties remain great, a continuation of that state of relative tranquillity cannot be taken for granted. A misjudgment by U.S. or West European policymakers—or merely greed on the part of the parties—could still plunge Bosnia back into war.

A crucial mistake would be to misinterpret NATO's role in Bosnia. Although NATO troops performed admirably in providing the necessary security framework for the September election, the earlier NATO role in making a peace settlement possible was at best peripheral. The much-vaunted NATO airstrikes in August 1995 came *after* the Serbs had accepted most of the provisions later embodied in the Dayton agreement. The key elements leading to the signing of the Dayton accord were, first, the battlefield success of Croatia and, second, the vital (albeit tacit) political concession by the United States of accepting the possibility of Bosnian partition.

That insight has important implications for future U.S. policy. On the political side, the United States should avoid the temptation to become involved in nation building in Bosnia. The September 14, 1996, balloting was the third election there since 1990. In each case the ethnic separatist vote has been dominant. The message is clear: the maintenance of Bosnia as a unitary state will be highly problematic. If it is maintained, all well and good. If, however, the forces for partition prove overwhelming, the United States should not seek to resist them.

While it is clear that a continued strong international presence will be indispensable to ensure Bosnia's transition to independent status, or to a peaceful partition, that role is best filled by European forces. The Europeans have the greatest interest in a stable Balkan region. Given institutional reforms within NATO (the establishment of the Combined Joint Task Force concept that provides for European NATO forces to operate independent of U.S. forces) and within the EU (the strengthening of the Western European Union—the military alliance of West European states), the Europeans now possess the capability to carry out that task. Under no circumstances should the role of U.S. forces in Bosnia be prolonged. An extended U.S. role would simply replicate the confusion and intra-alliance struggles over poh'cy of the past five years. It would also commit the United States to needless risk and expenditure. The former is significant, but the latter

should not be minimized. The existing deployment cost American taxpayers at least $3.5 billion through the end of 1996.

The United States has also made a series of little-noticed commitments elsewhere in the Balkans. Not only has Washington undertaken to arm and train a new Bosnian (Muslim-dominated) army, it has reached military agreements with Croatia and Macedonia and continues to deploy troops as part of a UN peacekeeping force in Macedonia. An extensive network of intelligence ties has also developed between the United States and Croatia, Macedonia, and Albania. Such commitments dangerously expose the United States and should be abandoned or reduced as soon as possible. It would be folly for Washington to seek to make the congenitally unstable Balkan peninsula an American protectorate.

The Bosnian conflict also contains wider lessons for U.S. security policy. Since the fell of the Berlin Wall in 1989, NATO has been looking for a new role. NATO's supporters who hoped that the Bosnia crisis would provide just such a justification for NATO's continued existence—with a new role of dampening "out-of-area" conflicts—are likely to be disappointed. That is hardly surprising. NATO is configured to meet a massive conventional threat across agreed international borders, not to deal with civil wars. Most analysts agree, however, that, for tihe foreseeable future, conflict in Europe will most probably arise from Bosnia-like intrastate disputes. To deal with those eventualities, new security institutions, directed by the Europeans, are needed in Europe. The United States should have no desire to become entangled in future Bosnias.

Suggested Readings

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