Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 36: The United States and Future Bosnias

August 8, 1995

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Executive Summary

The confusion that has bedeviled U.S. policy toward the Bosnian conflict could prove even more dangerous in the coming years. There are numerous disputes surfacing elsewhere in Eastern Europe that threaten to duplicate the intracommunal violence that has devastated Bosnia. The distinction between right and wrong or aggressor and victim will be extraordinarily difficult to draw in such murky struggles. Moreover, America's high-tech military, despite its many impressive capabilities, is not particularly useful in the guerrilla combat that U.S. forces will encounter if Washington attempts to intervene.

Because intracommunal conflicts in Eastern Europe do not pose a threat to America's security, the United States can and should adopt a consistent policy of nonintervention. The notion that Western, or even European, security is indivisible and requires a U.S. response to any breach of the peace is a product of obsolete Cold War thinking. The United States should encourage the Europeans to take greater responsibility for the security of their own region.

Introduction

The loss of an American F-16 aircraft has brought home the deepening seriousness of the Bosnian crisis. Speaking in the British parliamentary debate on Bosnia on May 31, 1995, David Howell, a member of the ruling Conservative party, said, "We are facing the most hideous choices between the bad and the very bad. There will be blood and mayhem if we don't act and blood and mayhem if we do."[1]

Comments like that, which have been echoed far and wide on both sides of the Atlantic, have reinforced the fatalism now gripping the foreign policy community about what to do about Bosnia. Bosnia is seen as a foreign policy problem of unprecedented difficulty. Compared to the Cold War challenges (which President Clinton has described with the benefit of a large dollop of hindsight as "clear and straightforward"), Bosnia is hideously "complex."[2]

The sense of complexity has overwhelmed the debate about Bosnia. It is as though policymakers have thrown up their hands in despair, concluding that the problems defy rational analysis. The result has been confused, contradictory statements from the administration. Calm deliberation has given way to crisis meetings and to a polarization of policy preferences--at one end, the immediate withdrawal of all UN forces, including the units of the West European powers; at the other, massive reinforcements and strategic bombing.[3]

It would, of course, be a rash commentator who suggested that any part of the Yugoslav crisis was straightforward. The large and expanding literature devoted to Balkan affairs unanimously attests to the region's complexities, and the Bosnian struggle is certainly no exception.

But that is no excuse for policy planners to abandon sober analysis. The fact of the matter is that we live in an "age of Yugoslavias."[4] If the United States is to avoid stumbling from crisis to crisis, we need to remind ourselves of some

of the common elements of the Bosnian conflict and the wider European situation.

Bosnia as Omen, Not Aberration

Three central factors about Bosnia stand out. An understanding of them may enable officials to base American policy on reality rather than on wishful thinking and short- term crisis management.

1. Far from being exceptional, the war in the former Yugoslavia is a drearily ordinary manifestation of intracommunal violence typical of European history. The situation in Bosnia is neither more complex, nor more atavistic, nor more deep-seated than the many other European disputes waiting their turn to step into the spotlight.

2. Those problems do not, however, pose the sort of direct threat to American security that major past adversaries, such as Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, or the Soviet Union, did. American military involvement in such post-Cold War European conflicts will, therefore, usually attract little public support.

3. Intracommunal problems frequently manifest themselves as civil conflicts rather than as wars between nations. Americans, including policymakers, will find it difficult to distinguish between friend and foe, right and wrong, and aggressor and victim.

In other words, Bosnia is not an aberration. It is the shape of the future in Eastern Europe and many other regions. That being the case, the current American approach to European security (with its deep roots in Cold War dogma) needs to be radically rethought.

Current doctrine, evolved during the bloc-to-bloc confrontation with the Soviet Union, teaches that European security is indivisible--a threat to one state is a threat to all--and that the way to meet any threat is with massive counterforce. Experience in Bosnia has shown the limitations of both of those propositions. The war in Bosnia, terrible though it has been, has not threatened America's security. And counterforce has simply made a bad situation worse.

Unfortunately, those lessons are not being learned. If Bosnia is indeed typical of future European security challenges, however, the need for rational analysis becomes all the more acute. Failure to draw the appropriate lessons from the Bosnian debacle will cause the United States to end up repeating the same mistakes elsewhere in Europe.

There are indications that that may already be happening. Instead of being sobered by their experience in Bosnia, American officials are instead actively seeking fresh fields for U.S. political-military engagement in Europe. They have instituted an ambitious program of extending the scope of American obligations in Europe's actual and potential Bosnia-like disputes.[5] The 1994 "Declaration of the Heads of State" from the NATO summit in Brussels, for example, starts by proclaiming that "our own security is inseparably linked to that of all other states in Europe." It then goes on to declare,

In pursuit of our common transatlantic security requirements, NATO increasingly will be called upon to undertake missions in addition to the traditional and fundamental task of collective defense of its members, which remains a core function. We affirm our readiness to support, on a case by case basis in accordance with our own procedures, peacekeeping and other operations under the authority of the Security Council or the responsibility of the CSCE [Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe], including by making available Alliance resources and expertise.[6]

Given that the CSCE (now the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE) includes the whole of Western Europe as well as the whole of the former Warsaw Pact, the NATO declaration--at least in theory--extends potential American commitments well beyond their Cold War limits--even into the Transcaucasus and central Asia.

The American people need to understand the implications of "peacekeeping and other operations," for they are far from reassuring. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that an American traveling in Central or Eastern Europe could find a potential Sarajevo in practically any city.

Other Potential Bosnias

One prominent potential source of trouble is Hungary and the Hungarian diaspora in Central Europe. After the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian empire in World War I, the territory of Hungary was reduced by roughly two-thirds. Overnight some 3.5 million ethnic Hungarians found themselves residents, not of Hungary, but of sometimes unfriendly foreign countries, principally Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Ukraine. Today there are 1.6 million Hungarians in Romania (concentrated in Transylvania), nearly 600,000 in Slovakia, approximately 400,000 in the former Yugoslavia (principally in Vojvodina), and some 170,000 in the transcarpathian region of Ukraine. Many Hungarians (by no means just extreme nationalists) seem to believe that the government in Budapest is responsible for all 15 million Hungarians, not just the 10.5 million who live in Hungary.[7]

The potential for serious friction (attributable to Hungarian aspirations to undo the World War I peace settlement or to discrimination against Hungarian ethnic minorities) between Hungary and all of those countries is considerable. The Hungarian communities in Transylvania and Vojvodina would, for example, not stand idly by if they feared that either Romanian or Serbian nationalism would erode their status. Tensions between Slovakia and Hungary could also erupt into violence. Slovaks blame the Hungarian minority for their country's political and economic malaise, and the Hungarians accuse the Slovaks of oppression. Those are precisely the sentiments the Serbs voiced before the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Elsewhere in Central Europe, Moldova displays many similarities to Yugoslavia. Historically, Moldova was Romania's third province (Transylvania and Walachia were the other two), but during the Ottoman Empire, Moldova was the subject of territorial haggling between Russia and the Turks. Romania was compelled to cede Moldova to the Soviet Union as part of the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop deal of 1939. The historical capital of Moldova, Lasi, is located in modern Romania. Seeking to foment ethnic tensions in the Soviet border regions as part of a divide-and-rule strategy, Stalin grafted onto Moldova a thin slice of Ukrainian territory on the east bank of the Dniester River. Today the leadership of that area is predominantly Russian--despite the fact that ethnic Russians are only the third largest population group after ethnic Moldovans and Ukrainians.

Since the demise of the Soviet empire, Romanian culture has been making a comeback in Moldova; for example, the Cyrillic alphabet is being replaced by the Latin. Reacting to those developments, ethnic Russians have sought independence for a self-styled "Transdniester" republic. Today units from the Russian 14th Army are unofficially assisting the Transnistrians.

The Moldovan government has gone to great lengths to accommodate the aspirations of the Transnistrians and has kept its distance from Romania. Similarly, the government in Bucharest has been at pains not to encourage reintegrationist tendencies in Chisinau. But the balance is delicate. In Romania the nationalist Romanie Mare (Greater Romania) party keeps expansionist hopes alive; in Moldova the Transnistrian population may seek to split off permanently. Once again, the potential for territorial fragmentation parallels that of former Yugoslavia.

The pattern of intracommunal suspicion is repeated in the Baltic states. Ethnic Balts commonly regard Russian settlers as colonists. Some 1.4 million Russians live in Latvia and Estonia, constituting 30 percent of the population in the former and 34 percent in the latter. Disagreement over the rights of ethnic Russians to participate as full citizens in those states provides constant opportunity for nationalists both in the Baltic republics and in Russia to foment mischief.

Crimea provides another example of the vagaries of European cartography. Crimea was conveyed to Ukraine in 1954 by a casual Kremlin diktat, ironically enough to mark the 300th anniversary of Ukrainian liberation from Polish-Lithuanian rule. The majority of Crimea's population, however, is Russian. Commentators have already described the Crimean as "the next Bosnia."[8] At present the United States strongly supports Ukraine's claim to Crimea.[9]

Farther east, the violent dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan exhibits the intricate crosscurrents of European history. In 1923, in furtherance of his objective of keeping the outlying parts of the Soviet empire in ferment against themselves rather than against the center, Stalin transferred the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, then populated mainly by Christian Armenians, from Armenia and to the predominantly Muslim Soviet republic of Azerbaijan. As Moscow's influence weakened, open warfare broke out in 1988. Hostilities have now claimed 15,000 lives on both sides, spilled over into adjacent Azeri territories, and resulted in 1 million internal refugees in Azerbaijan.

That conflict possesses much of the same potential for a wider regional war that Yugoslavia did, including the fault lines between Christianity and Islam and the machinations of outside powers--in this case, Russia, Iran, and (NATO member) Turkey. (As some observers have pointed out, if ever the latter two were to find a mutual casus belli, Azerbaijan would be it). There have also been covert trans- border assistance from neighboring states, rivalries among major international oil companies, and abundant humanitarian horrors. As in Bosnia, the distinctions between right and wrong are blurred to the point of indecipherability. Who is aggressor and who is victim in this tragedy? Reports on the war deliver diametrically opposed interpretations, depending on whether they are filed from Yerevan or from Baku.

In Georgia the situation is no less complex. In essence, Georgian nationalists who favor a unitary Georgian state are pitted against non-Georgian minorities in South Ossetia and the Muslim-inclined (though far from fundamentalist) Abkhazia region. The resulting violence has caused enormous population dislocation; 100,000 South Ossetians have fled to Russia's North Ossetia Autonomous Region. Russian troops have intervened forcibly to quell the fighting.

That list of potential flash points is by no means exhaustive. No mention has been made of Chechnya, for example, or of the other non-Russian enclaves inside Russia. The Institute of Geography at the Russian Academy of Sciences has identified 160 border disputes within the territory of the former Soviet Union, and the Stockholm International Institute for Peace has listed 30 current feuds in the Caucasus region alone.[10]

Of course, not all the disputes will necessarily explode the way Yugoslavia did. In some areas, there are encouraging signs. The Romanian, Hungarian, and Moldovan governments, for example, are all fully aware of the risks of ethnic tensions and are seeking to defuse potential flash points. Russia and Ukraine are negotiating constructively about Crimea's political status.[11]

But in all too many instances, armed conflict has already broken out or lurks just beneath the surface--with grievances that are chronically vulnerable to inflammation by agitators. To avoid repeating the tragicomedy of confused unpreparedness in Bosnia, Washington's policymakers need to analyze prudently and realistically how and where the ongoing or potential disputes fit into America's security calculations.

The "Indivisibility of Security" Myth

When assembling the components of the 1947 Truman Doctrine, Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson spoke of Europe as a barrel of apples in which one rotten one could contaminate the rest. The 1994 NATO summit declaration indicates that a similar, all-encompassing acceptance of the indivisibility of European security still predominates today.

That point of view is increasingly obsolete. The Soviet Union presented the United States with a threat that derived, in Dwight Eisenhower's words, from a "hostile ideology, global in scope, atheistic in character, ruthless in purpose, and insidious in method."[12] Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's comments in 1961 made clear the wide- ranging nature of the threat. The victory of communism would, he said, be obtained by a series of "national liberation wars" in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that would act as "centers of revolutionary struggle against imperialism."[13]

Given the intense and multifaceted nature of the Soviet challenge, there was credible evidence that security really

was indivisible. Soviet probes, first in Greece and Turkey, later in Angola, Afghanistan, Grenada, and Nicaragua, had a hostile global purpose that transcended the particular country in which they took place. The United States took action in those places, not because of their intrinsic importance, but because U.S. officials concluded that they represented the outlying skirmishes in a war that might one day directly threaten America's survival or independence.

The same political importance cannot be attached to Bosnia and Bosnialike conflicts, in spite of the enormous human suffering caused by such wars. Those struggles do not "matter" to the United States in the same way Cold War era conflicts did. To pretend otherwise places policy formation on an unstable base. For example, it matters little to the United States which of the warring parties in Tajikistan-- the Khojent, Kulab, Garm, or Pamir--comes out on top.[14]

The same analysis applies to Bosnia. In 1991 Secretary of State James A. Baker III warned of the dangers arising from the disintegration of Yugoslavia.[15] Nine months later the United States and its allies brushed aside those warnings

and led the way in recognizing six republics in the territory of former Yugoslavia. Despite that reversal of policy, no "clear and present" danger to the United States emerged. Similarly, whether the Bosnian Serbs end up in 1995 with 30 percent, 49 percent, 70 percent, or some other percentage of Bosnian territory matters in a wholly different way to the United States than did whether Greece fell to communist rule in 1947.

Instinctively, the American public has grasped that fundamental difference. During much of the Cold War national security ranked as the electorate's primary concern. Today only 9 percent of respondents to polls admit to following the Bosnian situation carefully.[16]

The natural consequence of the radical shift in public attitudes is to place severe inhibitions on the ability of American administrations (of whatever party) to deploy U.S. forces to conflict zones. The precipitous retreat from Somalia demonstrates all too clearly what happens when American overseas engagement goes beyond the limits of public toleration.

Consequently, there is a yawning contradiction at the heart of the Clinton administration's policy on Bosnia and, by extension, on all the other trouble spots in Europe and elsewhere. The assertion that those disputes are linked to American security in the same way Cold War conflicts were is unsustainable both in substance and in relation to public opinion. The administration is, therefore, left with a rhetorical commitment to take decisive action that it cannot honor. Much of the confusion about U.S. policy toward Bosnia has stemmed from that contradiction.

America's Irrelevant Military Advantages

Nowhere does the contradiction manifest itself more clearly than in military policy. On June 2, 1995, the Washington Post carried a photograph of two British soldiers training for action in Bosnia. They were not flying a helicopter gunship; they were kicking down the door to a shadowy basement.[17] That image brings home the true nature of modern war in murky Bosnia- or Somalia-style struggles-- an image that should not be obscured by the occasional technological marvel such as the rescue of the downed U.S. F-16 pilot in June 1995. Today's ethnic conflicts are not being fought between two national armies equipped with the latest technology. They are being fought village by village, street by street, door by door. Ask any Russian soldier who, despite total technological domination, finds himself fighting for his life in the back streets of Grozny.

Before assuming command of the UN troops in Bosnia, Lt. Gen. Rupert Smith made precisely that point during a lecture in London. "War, at least in its western form," he said, "to a large extent has lost its utility." The West is likely to face a series of conflicts in which its adversaries conduct operations, in Smith's words, "below a threshold at which the bulk of the west's technical superiority can be brought to bear."[18] The Serb seizure of UN hostages following the NATO airstrikes in May 1995 graphically confirmed his point. A U.S. Army officer commented, "It's real tough. And imagine how much tougher it is if there's a hostage handcuffed to the area where you're supposed to shoot."[19]

Such dilemmas make things extremely difficult for American military planners. They know as well as anyone that, despite extravagant claims to the contrary, America's wars have not been won by air power.[20] Ground troops are necessary to secure effective control of territory and implement political objectives. They also know the low level of public tolerance for American casualties. Gen. Philippe Morillon of France, the former UN commander in Bosnia, who knows the U.S. military well, has highlighted the reasons for today's preference for air power. "Desert Storm left one awful legacy: it imposed the idea that you must be able to fight the wars of the future without suffering losses. The idea of zero-kill as an outcome has been imposed on American generals." Morillon goes on to warn, "But there is no such thing as a clean or risk-free war."[21]

In an article written before his nomination as secretary of defense, William Perry tried to surmount that problem by proposing a multinational force for which the United States would provide logistics, intelligence, and stealth capabilities while other nations, including Russia, Germany, China, and Canada, provided the troops.[22] That is essentially what is happening in Bosnia.

All that approach does, however, is to expose another gap in American capabilities. U.S. armed forces are uniquely well equipped to fight a first-world war against a first- world adversary directly threatening the United States. Such a war would probably also receive widespread public support, since it would likely involve stakes directly relevant to

important American security interests.

That is not, however, the war that today's opponents are offering. Conscious of American high-tech superiority, they have circumvented that disadvantage. The United States itself once did the same--against the technologically superior British Redcoats. The latter complained of allegedly cowardly and uncivilized American tactics, such as shooting from behind rocks rather than out in the open, man to man. UN spokesmen echo those complaints in condemning Serb sniping attacks and hostage taking.

Today's intracommunal struggles are indeed uncivilized; cowardly tactics are the order of the day: no distinction is made between combatants and civilians, and the Geneva conventions do not apply. Under such circumstances, technological preeminence counts for little, and reliance on it is a cruel illusion.

Does the United States wish to enter today's conflicts on the terms in which they are actually being conducted? If so, the military's first consultants should be the police departments of some of America's more violent inner cities. For that is the kind of environment into which American soldiers would be stepping. Helicopter gunships and advanced fighter aircraft have little value for persuading the Bloods and Crips of south-central Los Angeles to coexist peacefully. It is far from clear that such sophisticated equipment will be any more successful in reconciling Serbs and Muslims, Hungarians and Romanians, Georgians and Abkhazians, or indeed any of Europe's feuding communities.

Toward a Policy of Selectivity and Restraint

For all those reasons, American post-Cold War security policy in Europe finds itself hamstrung. Both doctrine and instruments are out of touch with the requirements of the real world. The doctrine is the old-fashioned indivisibility of security that is untenable in substance and unsupported by public opinion. The instruments are too modern. They are designed to fight a high-tech, 21st-century war when in fact the demands are much less sophisticated.

As can be seen in Bosnia, that confusion can have dangerous implications, first by impelling American engagement in issues with little connection to American security, and second by sending American military personnel into harm's way ill prepared for their assigned task. Given that there are many more Bosnias lurking on or just below the horizon, the United States urgently needs to find a way out of its strategic confusion.

Washington's policymakers need to return to basics. Americans have always been willing to support overseas intervention to combat a real threat to national survival. They have also been prepared to provide the human and financial resources needed to win. Conversely, Americans have shown little readiness to involve themselves in conflicts that lack a direct American security interest and have marginal prospects of clear resolution.

Bosnia and the Bosnia look-alikes fall into the latter category. American policymakers should not shirk from drawing the necessary conclusion: that, without deep, long- lasting public support, American involvement in such conflicts--when it occurs at all--will necessarily be strictly limited and probably confined to offering background support to regional powers--in Europe, most likely the British and the French.

Such a policy of restraint would be wholly consistent with American diplomatic traditions and strategic calculations. It would also bring much-needed clarity to international conflict management. The current approach is based on the fiction that the United States will act as omnipresent guarantor of global security. That expectation enables other powers to evade their responsibilities for policing their own regions. Bosnia is a tragedy; if we are to avoiding repeating that experience as a farce, we need to face the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Fred Barbash, "Official Britain Bristles at Seizure of Its Troops," Washington Post, June 1, 1995, p. A18

[2] Bill Clinton, Address to Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colo., May 31, 1995. Excerpted in New York Times, June 1, 1995, p. A10.

[3] See, for example, William Drozdiak, "France, Britain Push to Form Quick-Reaction Force," Washington Post, June

2, 1995, p. A29; and Anthony Lewis, "The Speech Not Given," New York Times, June 2, 1995, p. A29.

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4) Jacques Attali, "An Age of Yugoslavias," Harper's, January 1993, pp. 20-22.

[5] For a useful summary of American policy on NATO, see Michael Dobbs, "Wider Alliance Would Increase U.S. Commit ments," Washington Post, July 5, 1995, p. A1.

[6] "Declaration of the Heads of State or Government Partic ipating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, on 10-11 January 1994," NATO Press Service M-1 [94]3, p. 3. Emphasis added. Much of the declaration's language reflects earlier discussions in the alliance, particularly those at the June 1992 foreign minis ters' meeting in Oslo.

[7] John Chipman, "Managing the Politics of Parochialism," in Ethnic Conflict and International Security, ed. Michael Brown (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 249.

[8] David Sneider and Igor Torkakov, "Crimea--the Next Bosnia," National Review, September 9, 1993, pp. 26-28.

[9] Daniel Williams, "Christopher Supports Ukraine in Feud over Crimea," Washington Post, May 24, 1994, p. A14.

[10] Attali, pp. 20-22.

[11] Plans to expand NATO eastward risk undoing much of that cautious diplomatic progress among the East European coun tries. See Jonathan Clarke, "An Expanded NATO: Scenario for Madness," Los Angeles Times, May 30, 1995, p. A35.

[12] Quoted in Stephen E. Ambrose, Eisenhower: Soldier and President (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 227.

[13] Quoted in Paul Johnson, A History of the Modern World (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p. 615.

[14] For an explanation of the Tajik situation from a Russian perspective, see Sergo A. Mikoyan, "Russia: War against Fanatics," Washington Post, June 6, 1995, p. A19.

[15] "U.S. Concerns about the Future of Yugoslavia," Excerpts from remarks by Secretary Baker at the Federation Palace, Belgrade, June 21, 1991, U.S. Department of State Dispatch 2, no 26 (July 1, 1991), p. 46.

[16] For Cold War data, see Daniel Yankelovich and I. M. Destler, eds., Beyond the Beltway: Engaging the Public in U.S. Foreign Policy (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), pp. 225- 52; and Godfrey Hodgson, In Our Time (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 68. For data on Bosnia, see Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press, quoted in Richard Harwood, ". . . And Still a Mystery to Most of Us," Washington Post, June 5, 1995, p. A21.

[17] Joel Brand, "UN, West Develop Plan to Move Troops in Bosnia," Washington Post, June 2, 1995, p. A25.

[18] Rupert Smith, "War and Conflict in the Future," Address to the War Studies Society, King's College, London, Septem ber 14, 1993. Copy in author's files.

[19] Quoted in Rick Atkinson, "Army Aims at Possible Bosnia Role," Washington Post, June 5, 1994, p. A17.

[20] For a trenchant critique of air power, see Eliot A. Cohen, "The Mystique of U.S. Air Power," Foreign Affairs 73 no. 1 (January 1994): 109-24.

[21] Quoted in Jim Hoagland, "Even America Gets the Blues," Washington Post, December 14, 1993, p. A25.

[22] William J. Perry, "Military Action: When to Use It and How to Ensure Its Effectiveness," in Global Engagement:

Cooperation and Security in the 21st Century, ed. Janne E. Nolan (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1994), pp. 235-42.