Time for a Post-Mortem on Bosnia?

BY SUSAN L. WOODWARD

It is said that Archduke Franz Ferdinand was repeatedly warned not to go to Sarajevo in June 1914. He refused to listen. Today's Bosnian conflict gives an eery symmetry to the 20th century in the West. The United States appears to understand little of Balkan history or of the possible consequences of repeating previous great-power behavior in the Balkans.

The crisis of the UN operation in former Yugoslavia had already come to a head before the United States insisted on renewed NATO air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs late last May. The Croatian military campaign in early May to retake a UN Protected Area, defying its UN-monitored cease-fire agreement; the rising casualties of French soldiers from snipers and crossfire; the increasing Bosnian Serb violations of the Sarajevo ceasefire agreement in response to the Bosnian government's spring military offensive; and parties' increased restrictions on UN freedom of movement had revealed the inability of peacekeeping troops to protect civilians and calm a conflict if one or more parties are bent on war and the international community will not enforce rules against a recognized state. UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali declared the UN operation untenable, arguing that it should either withdraw or reconfigure its troops and mandate.

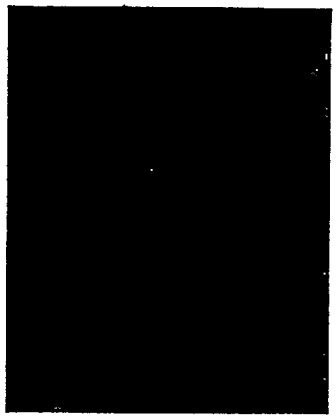
Only days before the air strikes, however, the two largest troop contributors, France and Britain, had decided to stay. When the Bosnian Serbs reacted to the strikes by taking UN hostages, the U.S. administration demanded an even greater show of force against "Serb defiance" but faced a worse choice than before; accept a UN mandate narrowed to humanitarian delivery and monitoring cease-fires, under rules of consent and self-defense, or mount its own coalition to replace the UN force and defeat the Serbs. The crisis even provided cover for Britain and France to act unilaterally, rather than waiting for a Security Council resolution, to strengthen their means of protecting troops by sending thousands more soldiers, artillery, and a rapid reaction force for self-defense. This then pushed the United States for the first time, arguing that the NATO alliance was at stake, to entertain sending U.S. ground troops to support their redeployment.

Nevertheless, the policy debate has remained unchanged since the UN forces were first deployed to Bosnia in mid-1992. The U.S. position remains that the UN forces should restore their "credibility" by using more force against the Bosnian Serbs. It still insists that diplomatic negotiations would succeed if they were backed by a credible threat. And Congress continues to view a solution in lifting the arms embargo, forcing a withdrawal of UN forces, and aiding the Bosnian government against Bosnian Serbs with arms deliveries, training, and NATO air strikes. In either version, the only route to peace is military advantage, even if the price is many more civilian deaths and ethnic cleansing.

The French and British position is that peacekeeping and peace enforcement are not the same; a force configured for promoting peace cannot become a force to impose peace without risking serious escalation. The UN operation became untenable in mid-1994 when it was tasked to implement U.S. policy: to shift the military balance in favor of the Bosnian government and to force the Bosnian Serbs with diplomatic isolation, economic sanctions, and bombing threats to accept the Contact Group peace plan. This policy was directly in conflict with the source of the peacekeepers' credibility—impartiality—and with their primary mission to reduce civilian casualties and keep the war from escalating while political negotiations proceeded.

But the focus on the UN's use of force ignores what is necessary to end the war: political arrangements to reassure all three communities of Bosnia-Herzegovina that they can, after all, live together, or international concession to their separation. The debate on forcefulness neglects the real issue of the UN crisis: the political disagreements among the major external players about the conflict and about the European security regime that is being redefined by the Bosnian war (and is necessary to its conclusion). Sent originally to prevent more refugees flowing into Europe and to appear to be doing something to stop the atrocities, the UN operation enabled the major powers to avoid confronting these conflicts.

Historical illiteracy has generated many wild ideas about the Balkans—that its peoples have a long history of ethnic animosity, that they are historically inclined to warfare and fragmentation, that the Russians are historical friends of the Serbs. Most fantastic, perhaps, is the concept of the Balkans as the tinderbox of world wars. In reality, local quarrels have attracted intervention, for reasons having little to do with local players, and the tinderbox they are able to ignite is conflict among the major powers. While thus far the Contact Group, NATO, and the UN Security Council have provided forums to contain their disagreements and conflicts of interest, the resulting absence of policy toward the conflict and the region have also produced four years of needless war and manufactured crises of credibility for those international organizations that they may not outlive. Is it perhaps time to do a post-mortem on policy toward the nations of former Yugoslavia before a post-mortem will be necessary on Bosnia? ■



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