

**US Policy in Bosnia: From observation to leadership.
Transatlantic disagreements in managing the crisis**

This article discusses the contentious issues between the Clinton Administration and its European allies concerning attempts to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). One of the reasons that these disagreements need to be examined is that they provide us with an early sample of differentiation between the two sides of the Atlantic in international crisis management. In addition, this differentiation also indicated the kind of leadership role that Washington aspired to perform in the context post-Cold War Europe.

This analysis argues that disagreements over international action in Bosnia challenged NATO's coherence. It prompted the United States to transform its policy stances over the war in Bosnia from an observer to that of effective leader in 1995. Effective leadership meant not only the ending of the war but also the US decision to assume the responsibility of enforcing the peace and crucially commit itself in this direction. As a result, its policy prescriptions were followed by European allies thus generating a peace implementation operation involving an unprecedented participation of forces (civilian and military) that proved strategically vital to Washington's aspiration of establishing an all inclusive pan-European security structure around NATO.

Transatlantic disagreements centred around four main issues:

- i. the peace plans that were proposed from 1992 until the end of 1994,
- ii. the US policy proposal of *lift and strike*,
- iii. the expansion of NATO's air campaign against the Bosnian Serbs at which Washington aimed,
- iv. the unilateral US withdrawal from enforcing the arms' embargo on Bosnia.

With the benefit of hindsight, it has been widely acknowledged that the uncoordinated policy of the international community over Bosnia, resulting to a great extent from transatlantic disagreements over the

means and methods of international intervention, is blamed for prolonging the war. The result was more deaths of innocent people and acts of horror, as it was the case in Srebrenica (June 1995) in which over 7,000 Muslims were massacred.

The Vance-Owen Peace Plan (VOPP)

The Vance-Owen Peace Plan was promoted by the International Conference on Former Yugoslavia (ICFY), an institution representing both the UN and the EU¹. It reflected the international community's effort to establish a decentralized state in Bosnia with internal borders that might satisfy the claims of Muslims, Croats and Serbs for ethnic autonomy (not utter purity) "yet make further attempts at secession more difficult"².

The most important objective of the VOPP was to deter Bosnian-Serbs from attaining ethnically cleansed contiguous territories³. However, this goal was hard to accomplish without a strong international pressure since the VOPP required the Bosnian Serbs, undefeated in the battlefield, to relinquish almost 27 per cent of the total surface area of BiH and desist from claiming land, which already established contiguous territory for the Bosnian Serbs. In other words, the VOPP needed, as envisioned by its planners, a demonstration of international resolve and unity in order to be enforced. No doubt, the key element for the success of the plan rested on US support. Washington was to provide the international coherence vital for the diplomatic efforts and to encourage the warring factions to see the realities at hand⁴. However, the Clinton administration remained, at best, as Lord Owen puts it, a "half-hearted

1. The ICFY was formed as an *ad hoc* institution representing both the United Nations and the European Community (later the European Union) through their envoys, Cyrus Vance (a highly respected US diplomat) and Lord David Owen (senior British political figure) respectively.

2. Steven I. Burg, "A Settlement: Lessons of the Diplomatic Process", in Stephen J. Blank (ed), *Yugoslavia's Wars: The Problem From Hell*, Strategic Studies Institute Roundtable Report, Carlisle Barracks, 1995, p. 64.

3. See, James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will, International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War*, London 1997, p. 243.

4. This was an argument frequently made by Lord Owen either publicly or privately. See, Paul Lewis, "Balkan Mediators Press Their Plan", *The New York Times* (4 February 1993).

spectator(s) on the sidelines”, at worse, the major critic of the plan’s effectiveness and morality⁵.

Whereas the Clinton administration was quick to advocate the deployment of American troops for the implementation of whatever peace settlement could be agreed by the three parties, it proved that the Pentagon was practically rejecting the deployment of American forces to enforce a peace plan in a “non-permissive” environment⁶. As Gen. Colin Powell, at the time Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted, “if we are going to have peacekeeping let us make sure there is peace before we start moving in”⁷. For the Pentagon, enforcing a peace plan required the presence of an overwhelming force that could discourage any attacks against the troops while the results of the operation had to be anticipated and well defined. In light of these general principles, enforcement of VOPP at that stage was for the Pentagon inconceivable. Hence, the Clinton administration was constrained to put its muscle behind a decisive international effort to render the plan acceptable to the warring factions and especially the Bosnian Serbs.

In the successive peace settlements that were promoted until the spring 1995⁸, emphasis on Bosnia’s coherence was meager, as was Washington’s support. According to Stephen Larrabee, the US had adopted a policy of “benign neglect” regarding the negotiations that were taking place in the context of the ICFY⁹. Washington’s main policy stance was not to pressurize the Bosnian Government to accept a bad peace plan and in practice to facilitate its negotiating position by threatening the use of NATO air power that could weaken the Serbian side. For some analysts, such an approach also rendered US participation

5. David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, London 1995, pp. 89-90.

6. There is a difference between a “permissive environment” in which international forces have been accepted (or invited) by the local authorities, and a “non permissive environment” in which troops are considered by the local authorities and other groups as enemies and frequently become subject to hostilities and military attacks.

7. Gen. Colin Powell testimony on Fiscal Year 1994, *Hearing Before the Appropriations Committee*, US Senate, 103rd Congress, 1st Session, 21 April 1993, Washington 1993, p. 91.

8. The ICFY had been replaced in mid 1994 by the Contact Group.

9. F. Stephen Larrabee, “Implications for Transatlantic Relations”, in Matthias Jope (ed), *The Implications of the Yugoslav Crisis for Western Europe’s Foreign Relations*, Chaillot Papers, 17 October 1994, Paris 1994, p. 25.

with ground forces in a peacekeeping operation a distant contingency¹⁰.

During the first two years of the Clinton administration, European bitterness over the US stance was compounded by Washington's insistence on NATO expanding the conditions upon which air strikes could be launched against Bosnian Serbs. The "benign neglect" of the Clinton administration over the attainment of a peace settlement on the one hand and its insistence on the use of NATO air strikes, as will be discussed below, led France and Britain to threaten (January 1994) with the withdrawal of their troops from the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR).

Gradually and in the name of NATO's coherence, Washington shifted in the direction of searching for a peaceful way of establishing a Croat-Muslim Federation. This proved a crucial asset in the formation of the Dayton Peace agreement a year later. However, Washington's inclination to keep Milosevic isolated from any negotiations following the establishment of the Federation and until the summer of 1995 militated against an earlier peace settlement.

The second element of American policy that caused friction between the Clinton administration and its European allies was the US policy proposal known as *lift and strike*. It provided the lifting of the arms embargo against the Bosnian Government, "inherited" from an early United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR -713- 1991) that applied to all former Yugoslavia. The second half of the proposal provided the launch of NATO air strikes that would prevent the Bosnian Serbs from attacking the Bosnian Government and thus providing the latter with the adequate "breathing" space to acquire time and weaponry to defend itself¹¹.

In the view of the Clinton administration, voiced almost constantly to its European allies until summer 1995, the continuation of the arms

10. Paul Lewis, "New Clashes Stall Bosnia Talks: Mediators Criticize Clinton Plan", *The New York Times* (3 August 1993). See also, Laura Silber and Allan Little, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, London 1995, pp. 304-305.

11. Certainly, there were different nuances of the *lift and strike* proposal supported by segments of the US Congress and other lobby groups some of which even advocating an all-out NATO air campaign that could include targets in Serbia proper. For the different approaches see, Fotini Bellou, *American Leadership Image and the Yugoslav Crisis. 1991-1997*, Ph.D Thesis, King's College London 2000, pp. 134-140.

embargo against Bosnia was depriving a free state of its right to self-defence. Several US officials and especially a republican portion of Congress, were publicly criticizing the "European timidity" which in the name of sustaining whichever stability in the region, it was undermining the survival of the Bosnian State. Indeed, at that time the level of urgent acquisition of weaponry was to define Bosnia's very existence.

There is certainly logic in the aforementioned argument which can hardly be challenged. At the same time, however, what was a nightmarish scenario for troop contributing countries, such as the British and the French, was that the lifting of the arms embargo would lead to an unrestrained (and thus beyond control) influx of military equipment. Accordingly, the level of conflict would have been aggravated while negotiations in search for a settlement would have been terminated. In addition, the launch of a NATO air campaign was deemed by European ground forces dangerous. In particular, British and French officers advocated that NATO's air strikes were bound to abolish the neutrality of the international presence in Bosnia thus rendering the peacekeeping troops on the ground vulnerable targets by the warring factions¹². In such a context, the withdrawal of UN troops would have to precede the initiation of any NATO air campaign.

For France the issue was considered more complicated. As the French Foreign Minister Alain Zuppé argued in May 1993: "I haven't agreed with the so-called division of labour between those who are in the sky and those who are on the ground (...) I wish that all the great powers involved in the painful drama will assume their responsibility"¹³. Allied disillusionment stemmed from Washington's preference that in a *lift and strike* scenario, UNPROFOR would be reinforced and remain *in situ* to support the operation¹⁴. Indeed, UNPROFOR had neither the authorization to enforce peace, nor the right to retaliate for aggressive action against itself. Thus, European disagreement was often turned to disillu-

12. As examined below, NATO air strikes had been launched at certain occasions (specific and limited) since 1993. However, the extensive character of the air campaign that was advocated in the context of *lift and strike* was to bring NATO few steps away from its role to protect UN troops or enforce UNSC resolutions.

13. Cited in Elaine Sciolino, "Allies Announce Strategy to Curb Fighting in Bosnia: U.S. Offers Planes, not Men", *The New York Times* (23 May 1993).

14. Owen, *op.cit.*, p. 161.

sionment when the Clinton administration publicly maintained that Washington was not inclined to reinforce UNPROFOR with US ground troops.

British and French criticisms revolved around the main element of the US approach. Namely, the US tendency to subscribe policies often requiring allied troops to get involved in particularly demanding and frequently dangerous tasks while constraining the US contribution to air campaigns.

The third issue that generated strong transatlantic friction regarded the question of expanding NATO air strikes. At this point, it should be elaborated that NATO air strikes were launched in Bosnia since 1993. These operated either in the context of enforcing the UNSCR-844 (1993), which had imposed a “no fly” zone throughout Bosnia (operation *Deny Flight*) or when called to protect UN troops on the ground (Close Air Support-CAS). The third occasion in which NATO air strikes could be launched regarded the protection of “safe areas”, established in spring 1993¹⁵. When some of the safe areas (Sarajevo and Gorazde) were characterized (early 1994) as demilitarized zones, non compliance by the factions with the relative provisions also meant retaliatory air strikes.

The Close Air Support operations as well as punitive air strikes were under the “double key” clause. This meant that its initiation was conditioned upon the call from the commander on the ground (first key) as well as the authorization by the United Nations Secretary General or later his representative (second key). CAS was a timely operation striving to uphold impartiality and proportionality in the use of force. Punitive air strikes, aimed at punishing the party responsible for severe interference with the humanitarian relief leading to the strangulation of safe areas¹⁶. Punitive air strikes could involve a wider targeting process, the identification of which was to be determined by the UN and NATO. Frequently the targeting was strictly related to the violating weaponry and at times to its essential support facilities.

The question about the use of punitive air strikes, also known as

15. These were: Sarajevo, Tuzla, Gorazde, Zepa, Srebrenica, Bihac.

16. *Press Statement by the Secretary General Following the Special Meeting of the North Atlantic Council*, Brussels, 2 August 1993, para. 3 and 6; and *Decisions Taken at the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 9th August 1993*, NATO Press Release, Decision 1.

strategic air strikes, was the issue that generated serious friction between Washington on the one hand and Britain, France and the UN, on the other. For US officials, the presence of the UN as an interlocutor in NATO military decisions, was inconceivable¹⁷. Also for Pentagon officials, such UN interference was endangering the success of the operations as well as the prestige of the Alliance. Perhaps more importantly, the Clinton administration often contended that there should have been strategic air strikes of multiple targeting not only to deter Serbian offensives throughout Bosnia and prevent the shelling of safe areas but also bring the Bosnian Serbs to the negotiating table¹⁸. Accordingly, each time there was a violation or non-compliance incident by the Bosnian Serbs, US officials were advocating to their European allies the expansion (of targeting) of NATO air strikes. This was a request that literally enraged European officials.

Britain and France countered the US approach with the advocacy about the neutrality and proportionality of UNPROFOR in the use of force while addressing the perils entailed in Washington's stance. Indeed, there was not only the peril of conflict escalation but also the threat of hostage incidents against UN troops¹⁹. For European allies, the composition, and, because of that, the authorization of the UN forces was not allowed for expanded air operations, which were bound to create an uncontrolled situation to the assistance of which the Clinton administration was not able to provide ground troops.

Indeed, there were a number of hostage incidents. Most serious of those were the November 1994 incident (400 UN hostages) and in May 1995 which occurred immediately after some extensive NATO air strikes respectively in Udbina and Bihac. There should be no doubt that the hostage crisis in Bihac in 1995 outraged French and British officials and in practice set the base of a new offensive approach that was launched by Gen. Sir Rupert Smith, who managed to change the rules of engagement

17. See, Roger Cohen, "NATO Gives Serbs a 10-Day Deadline to Withdraw Guns", *The New York Times* (10 February 1994).

18. See Thomas L. Friedman, "Clinton Says He's Ready to Hit Serbs Attacking U.N. in Bosnia", *The New York Times* (28 July 1993).

19. With the benefit of hindsight, that was almost the scenario that took place in the Kosovo war in 1999 according to which Serbian forces exploited the NATO air campaign as to escalate operations of ethnic cleansing.

of UN forces on the ground and to include peace enforcement tactics²⁰. No doubt, the enforcement tactics proved effective at different points in August and September 1995 in ending the war in Bosnia²¹.

Finally, the issue that created strong fissures in NATO's coherence was the unilateral US withdrawal from enforcing the arms embargo on Bosnia in November 1994. At the operational level the decision did not cause serious changes to the enforcement of the ban, as it was carried out at the time. The salience of the decision, however, rests on the fact that Washington conceived (in practice misperceived) that through that decision could get the leverage to pressurize its European allies to acquiesce to Washington's urge for extensive NATO air strikes against Bosnian Serbs by challenging publicly NATO's coherence²².

The decision by the Clinton administration to withdraw from enforcing the arms embargo was the result of a serious misperception. This became evident from the immediate shift in policy to which the Clinton administration was forced to move in the following weeks²³. Importantly, the shifts in US stance not only touched upon its entire approach toward Bosnia but it was compounded by a demonstration of Allied solidarity.

The US decision generated an uproar within the Alliance. It is worth mentioning that the enforcement of the arms embargo was a decision from the UN Security Council which NATO had accepted to implement (operation Sharp Guard). Historically, it was one of the first NATO out of area operations according to its new role in crisis management in the post-Cold War setting. In this respect, the message that Europeans received was that the leading member of the Alliance is torpedoing its coherence and unity through a unilateral decision which had not even

20. Certainly, this shift from peacekeeping to peace-enforcement was related not only to growing European frustration but perhaps more importantly to the pledge by the Clinton administration in December 1994 that in case UNPROFOR was under danger and had to withdraw from Bosnia, then Washington would have to deploy at least 20,000 troops to their assistance in a major NATO withdrawal operation.

21. See Bellou, *op.cit.*, pp. 182-190 and 194-197.

22. Leaked by an administration official, Phillip Gordon, "US Lawmakers Agree on Bosnia Arms Measure", *The New York Times* (10 August 1994).

23. The difficult position in which Washington was found within the Alliance because of the administration's policies in Bosnia is comprehensively covered by the major US press throughout December 1994.

been directed by a vital national interest.

The crisis had been transferred to the NATO NAC meeting in 24 November. At that stage Washington was advocating the expansion of NATO air strikes and the expansion of UNPROFOR tasks in Bihac, which was experiencing strong Serbian offensives and thus had to be upgraded into a demilitarized zone. The administration's weak leverage was particularly obvious in the North Atlantic Council. The European reaction to Washington's policy proposals was that should Washington wanted them being implemented, it had to contribute troops on the ground both in the assistance of NATO air strikes and to strengthen the composition of the UNPROFOR dispatch in Bihac which was already stretched to its limits. The outspoken reaction by both London and Paris caught Washington by surprise. Also surprising was the extent to which American influence had been wounded. The low level of transatlantic relations had been compounded by the strong criticisms voiced by leading republican figures in Congress regarding European timidity and hesitancy to act beyond UN rules of engagement. For example, the criticism by Senator Bob Dole, the Republican leader in Congress, who regarded the British "as the major stumbling block to an effective UN policy in Bosnia" so exasperated the British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind as to thunder that "it ill becomes people in countries who have not provided a single soldier on the ground to make that kind of criticism"²⁴.

The announcement by London and Paris of their decision to contemplate the immediate reinforcement of their troops in UNPROFOR seemed to have sent alarming signals to Washington. For UNPROFOR reinforcement meant not only a preparation to encounter yet another hostage incident, as the one their forces had just experienced after the Udbina air strikes, but also reinforcement was also necessary in an UNPROFOR withdrawal operation. This was received by Washington as a signal to shift its policy towards Bosnia by taking into account its allies security concerns. From 24 November until the end of 1994, the Clinton administration launched a damage limitation exercise which literally touched upon all aspects of its previous policy stances on Bosnia. In particular, it started to voice its inclination to get seriously

24. Cited in Pat Towell and Carrol J. Doherty, "Republicans Lay Siege to Clinton's Policy", *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 52, No. 47, p. 3453.

involved in the search for a negotiated peace settlement among the warring factions as well as its obligation to sustain its leadership position in the Alliance. At that time, President Clinton publicly pledged the deployment of 25.000 US troops on the ground to the assistance of a potential UNPROFOR withdrawal. In practice, that very pledge proved to be the instrumental factor in mobilizing Washington to commit itself in ending the war in Bosnia in the summer 1995.

Conclusion

The brief presentation of the issues that caused transatlantic disagreement during the war in Bosnia aimed at showing the degree of peril such friction can cause to international security. For the war in Bosnia could have ended earlier had there been strong and constant allied unity and coherence. Most importantly, it also shows that even the most powerful state, the undisputed world leader, can also challenge its own prestige and influence when it does not take its followers' perspective into consideration. On the contrary, when the leader and followers act in a context of mutual understanding, then both the credentials of leadership as well as the benefits of being a follower are multiplied. It would have been a misconception to regard the current debate about the merit of the transatlantic bond as been caused by the disagreements occurred during the war in Bosnia. In fact, in the next crisis in which NATO was involved as the leading institution in both peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations, in Kosovo, it demonstrated strong unity and was successful.

However, one has to consider the serious damages that allied disagreements can cause to the coherence of the international community especially when is mostly needed, namely at times of managing international crises. As the case of Bosnia demonstrates, transatlantic incoherence delayed the ending of the war, caused fissures in NATO and did not prevent the death of human lives. Even current rhetoric challenging transatlantic relations can be perilous to several aspects of international relations. It might be hard to escape the conclusion that today the world has become even more perilous for all as to unquestionably and lightly advocate the decomposition of the transatlantic bond.