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Yugoslavia: Quagmire or Strategic Challenge?

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SUMMARY: *To the consternation of supporters of increased European union, Europe has proven incapable of dealing with the carnage on its doorstep. While Western European political leaders dither, Yugoslavia commits suicide, the viciousness of its actions increasing the indecision in European capitals. In this briefing paper, William E. Odom, Hudson's director of national security studies, argues that only NATO, led by the United States, can effectively muster the military and political will to stop the Serbian and Croatian bloodletting.*

Achieving a perfect regional peace is an unattainable goal. Fortunately, that is not the only option. A well-equipped force of 300,000 to 400,000 troops might pose enough of an obstacle to a continuation of the large-scale hostilities to allow the imposition of a peace process.

Moral, political, and economic factors all support American-led intervention in the Yugoslav civil war. What we stand to gain is important: peace, economic stability, continued legitimacy for the new and existing European democracies, and reaffirmation of America's leadership role in Europe. What we could lose through inaction is sobering: NATO unity, the democratic gains of the last decade in Central and Eastern Europe, international cooperation, and much more.

Introduction

Is the crisis in Yugoslavia a quagmire, another Vietnam, a situation to be avoided at all costs? The former judgment is the conventional wisdom, and most of those who favor U.S. involvement see it as a moral challenge, not a strategic one. The debate needs to be widened to discuss the strategic and human dimensions of the civil war among the South Slavs.

Although it may become a quagmire, Yugoslavia is not another Vietnam. The strategic objective in Vietnam, as articulated by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, was to contain China. In the 1960s, however, continuing to contain China was a primary interest of the Soviet Union, not of the United States. Committing half a million U.S. troops to support Soviet strategy made no sense. Until Americans understand this basic flaw in the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, we will continue to draw flawed lessons from it. It never was in our strategic interest to be so heavily involved.

On the other hand, containing and reducing the violence in Yugoslavia may well be a strategic interest of the U.S. Although the moral reasons for intervention are compelling in their own right, they are not the only incentives for seriously

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considering U.S. involvement within a U.N. and NATO context. Let us review what those additional reasons might be.

The Stability of Europe

First, a stable and democratic Europe is generally agreed to be a key U.S. interest. If there is to be a new world order, surely that kind of Europe will be one of its cornerstones. European political and military unification has been an aspiration for a long time, of course, and the Maastricht Treaty appeared to be a major step toward that goal. A united Western Europe, if it is to be anything, ought to be able to deal with peace and war in Eastern Europe. But recent efforts by the EC and Western European Union to intervene in Yugoslavia make it painfully clear that such a new Europe is not at hand and is not likely to arrive in the near future.

Why is the outlook for European unity so bleak? The answer lies in understanding how Western Europe has made as much progress as it has in its cooperative economic and security arrangements. Throughout the Cold War, the United States military power within NATO served as an effective substitute for a supranational political authority in Europe. The U.S. presence made it possible for old adversaries to trust one another in ways never before possible. France, however, has long bridled at the U.S. leadership role in Europe, and some German political leaders share that emotion. At the same time, asking the United States to leave Europe means accepting German predominance in any new supranational political structure. The malaise and confusion in France today arise over the dilemma of whether to place the country's future in a Europe led by Germany or an Atlantic community led by the United States. Most Europeans, including most Germans, prefer the latter solution, but they are unsure of American constancy in the post-Cold War era.

Only a strong NATO with the U.S. centrally involved can prevent Western Europe from drifting

into national parochialism and eventual regression from its present level of economic and political cooperation. Failure to act effectively in Yugoslavia will accelerate this drift. That trend toward disorder will not only affect U.S. security interests but also U.S. economic interests. Our economic interdependency with Western Europe creates large numbers of American jobs. Thus, Yugoslavia stands as a test of the resilience of the Atlantic community. That is indeed a major strategic challenge for U.S. leadership.

Second, transitions to democracy and market economies in Eastern Europe are essential to the stability of the whole of Europe. If several of these former communist states fail to make the transition, they are likely to turn to dictatorships that maintain the old statist economies, poverty income levels, hyperinflation, and wide discontent. Weimar Germany is often cited as the model for the political developments beginning to take shape in Eastern Europe, and this view has a certain cogency. Ethnic strife and border quarrels are sure to increase in number and intensity. An independent Slovakia with nearly one million Hungarians within its borders will be tempted to engage in "ethnic cleansing." Lithuania has hardly been tolerant of its Polish minority, and it eyes Kaliningrad (old Königsberg), which it insists was once part of Lithuania. Transylvania, populated by Romanians and Hungarians, is another potential environment for "ethnic cleansing."

The example of Yugoslavia will make an important impression on leaders in other troubled areas. If Serbians and Croats get away with ethnic cleansing, other East Europeans will feel less constrained. Former Soviet republics such as Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia will also be affected by the Yugoslav example. An effective NATO-led intervention in Yugoslavia may not prevent similar problems elsewhere in the region, but it should have a restraining influence.

Third, as the conflict widens in Yugoslavia to include Macedonia and Kosovo, it is bound to spill

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across international borders into Bulgaria, Greece, and Albania. The consequences are terrible to contemplate. Can a wealthy and democratic Western Europe sit by and tend to its internal affairs while strife expands in neighboring states? Here the moral and ethical factors begin to take on strategic significance for the preservation and development of the political values of Western Europe. The hypocrisy of standing aside could weaken those values and eventually undermine the legitimacy of liberal democracy. Germany's troubled debate on the flow of refugees arriving there is just the beginning.

Meanwhile, Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia mark a historic cultural, religious, ethnic, and political fault line in Europe: Orthodox Slavs versus Catholic Slavs versus Muslims. Their fellow ethnics or coreligionists in Russia, Western Europe, and Turkey could well be drawn in. If one ponders the potential expansion of the Yugoslav civil war, it is difficult to see how it can be ignored and expected not to have an adverse effect on relations among a large number of European and Middle Eastern states.

A Plan for Intervention

Several compelling strategic factors, therefore, favor a NATO-led intervention. The stumbling block seems to be that no one believes that a military intervention can be effectively executed. No clear political objectives have been suggested, nor has a technical military plan been advanced. To move the discussion off dead center, let me suggest the following approach.

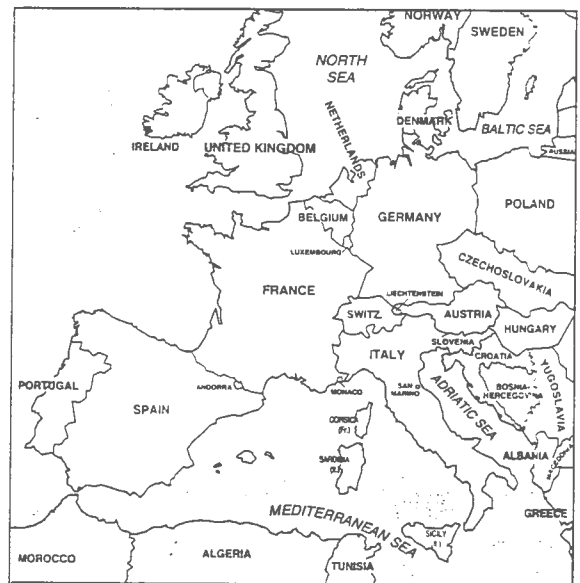
First, the political objectives have to be limited and specified. They could be as follows:

- Reducing the level of violence, although not stopping all aspects of the fighting

- Preventing the conflict from crossing international borders
- Creating a negotiating context that can last until all parties reach a viable solution, which might take several years
- Forcing the immediate return of any territory taken by force or ethnic cleansing

Achievement of these objectives would bring the conflict under a degree of control, reduce the casualties and human suffering, and demonstrate that such violence will not achieve lasting gains.

The second step is to design a military intervention to support these goals. What would it look like? Air strikes could destroy all the air forces in the country and reduce the amount of artillery now steadily shelling urban areas. Then, a large



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complement of ground forces would enter Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia. Eventually, they would probably have to enter Macedonia. This action would require six to ten divisions of heavy forces. With supporting units, this could mean 300,000 to 400,000 troops.

The tactical employment of these ground forces should be designed to prevent friendly casualties and keep them to the lowest level possible. At the same time, it should reduce if not eliminate operations by indigenous regular military forces. It should not aim at stopping all irregular military actions but rather attempt to keep them limited in scale and few in number.

These tactical aims might be achieved by selecting a dozen or more locations astride key cities and road networks in which to place large military "fire bases"—that is, fortresses of armor, infantry, artillery, and helicopter units deployed within circular defenses too strong for penetration by local forces. Each fire base should contain at least one reinforced brigade and perhaps two or three brigades, and they should have heliports or airfields within their perimeters. Over time, comfortable facilities could be built for the troops, making these bases into small, self-contained military cities. The fire bases should maintain reconnaissance throughout their sectors of responsibility, looking for local military groupings that might attack them or the local populace.

Once in place, this network of strong points would be able to reduce the civil war to small and limited actions. As NATO forces slowly gathered up local weapons and ammunition stocks, even those limited actions would subside. This military posture would have to be sustainable for several years while negotiations created a context in which uncooperative local political leaders might be overthrown by NATO-sponsored elections.

Who would supply such a large occupying military force? Germany, France, Britain, Turkey, Italy, and Greece together should contribute at least four or five divisions. Russia and Ukraine should provide some units. And, of course, the United States would

have to provide a division or so (50,000 to 100,000 troops), perhaps a heavy corps and many special units with capabilities not extant in the European forces. Only the United States has the command, control, communications, and intelligence means to knot together such an operation.

The Potential Benefits of Action

The arrival of such a force—and the knowledge that it had come to stay for many years—would create an entirely new political mood in Yugoslavia. The negotiators and political officials aligned with this force would have to win enough political support among local leaders to prevent a polarization of all the local peoples against the intervention. Bringing food and medical supplies, of course, should be enough to win some initial acceptance, and the reduction of violence should expand that popular support. In time, many towns and villages could return to normal life.

This approach to the employment of ground forces should avert tragedies such as the attack on the U.S. Marine battalion in Lebanon. The strongly fortified bases should make it extremely difficult for local irregular forces to inflict casualties on the intervention forces. Nor would large casualties arise from "search and destroy" operations like those conducted in Vietnam. Vietnam-style "pacification" would not be a mission of these forces. They would not be committed to tracking down small guerrilla groups in the mountains. They would only seek to prevent major military operations between the warring parties. Therefore, the German Army's experiences in Yugoslavia during World War II are not a relevant measure of the difficulties to be faced in this crisis, nor are the U.S. experiences in Vietnam and Lebanon.

To maintain such a deployment for years, maybe a decade or two, may seem impossible at first thought; but we do have precedents such as several decades of large deployments in Korea and Western Europe. They have been preferable to the alternative: that is, endless civil strife and wars. Because



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Yugoslavia is in Europe, the bulk of the forces must come from Europe, but only the United States has the experience and the means for putting such a large operation together and getting the multilateral cooperation it would require. No alternative exists in Europe today. No single state's military establishment comes close to having the know-how or the means to lead such an operation.

This approach may not be the single best solution, but it offers a starting point for thinking practically about what we can and cannot do. If the strategic reasoning offered here about why the United States should undertake such an operation is flawed, someone needs to make that case cogently. If the limited political objectives are flawed, someone needs to suggest better ones. And if there is a better military plan, it should be advanced.

Moral indignation and hand-wringing may be understandable, but they offer no basis for action. Executive and legislative officials dismissing all military options with generalizations about Vietnam and quagmires are equally unhelpful. We do not have several years to debate this issue. It

is high time we moved beyond posturing and decided whether, indeed, we have strategic interests at stake in Yugoslavia and specifically what we can do about them.

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