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If It's Worth Doing At All, Is It Worth Doing Wrong?

Yugoslavia and the Next Time

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Go out there and get shot! What we need now is a
futile gesture.

—Flanders and Swann comedy routine
on World War I, circa 1975

The central theoretical problem in the field of national
security policy is to clarify and distinguish between
the two central concepts of *deterrence* and *defense*.

—Glenn H. Snyder, 1961²

Whether the U.S./UN/rest-of-the-world should
intervene militarily in Bosnia and the rest of the former
Yugoslavia is a very tough call. Even for those
(including me) who are inclined against such
intervention, the horror of the ongoing atrocities makes
that stance *feel* terribly wrong. Nonetheless, what
should be clear is the pointlessness of futile inter-
vention—intervention that helps nobody and nothing
but might make the intervenors feel better, at least as it
starts and before its failure becomes obvious.

This Issue Paper explores the possibility of nonfutile
military intervention, along the theoretical lines of

¹The author wishes to thank his RAND colleagues Ronald
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resulting direction.

²Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, Princeton University
Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1961, p. 3.

deterrence in Professor Snyder's dichotomy, and
suggests that it could be done. The conclusion, however,
is that such deterrence would be so difficult and some of
its implications so dreadful in themselves that
nonintervention, in all of its amorality, seems preferable.

For Yugoslavia it may be moot. At this writing in
the mid-summer of 1993, nonintervention, or at the limit
futile intervention, seems to be our direction. Even if this
paper becomes obsolete in that regard, the argument
may apply to the next time—and there will be a next
time—and finally to the time when a similar tragedy
may be played out in terms of threatened use of nuclear
weapons. Indeed, the ideas presented here originate
from a recently completed study of deterrence of nuclear
use in the post-Cold-War era.³ This paper consists of
two short sections, one on Yugoslavia and one on the
next time we find ourselves faced with a similar
dilemma.

Yugoslavia

The United States and all the other states that are
disturbed by the use of military force to achieve political
objectives in the former Yugoslavia, and are horrified by

³Robert A. Levine, *Uniform Deterrence of Nuclear First Use*, RAND,
MR-231-CC, 1993.

the brutality with which that force is being applied, have three apparent major objectives:

- To restore a political situation with some balance, in which the use of force will not be seen to have succeeded. The Vance/Owen plan might have resulted in such a rollback.
- To punish the people responsible for the atrocities, particularly those based on “ethnic cleansing.”
- To provide a warning against a “next time,” in the former Yugoslavia or elsewhere.

A possible additional objective, instrumental to achieving the three basic ones, may be:

- To “level the playing field,” by assisting the Bosnian Muslims to at least hold the little they retain. Some, particularly among our European allies, have objected that this would merely prolong the bloodshed, however.

It is important to note that all these objectives have developed from the deteriorating situation. Had the world, or at least the Western powers, agreed in advance on goals and stakes, perhaps the catastrophe could have been precluded. However, recalling the time, little more than a year before this writing, when the United States favored holding together the Yugoslav state, Germany was pulling for immediate recognition of Croatia, and Bosnia was a peaceful multi-ethnic mountain province out of the line of fire, throws some doubt on that possibility.

In any case, to achieve the current goals of restoration, punishment, and future prevention, we have what increasingly seem to be only two courses of action, both difficult:

- To tighten the sorts of economic and political sanctions on the chief aggressor, Serbia, that were instituted when the war in Bosnia began. The trouble with this is that nobody really expects it to work in achieving any of the objectives.
- To take military action. This could include lifting the arms embargo on the Bosnian Muslims. In itself, that would help little with the three major objectives, but it could help “level the playing field” and might provide some small territorial rebalancing.

Whether and how such military action might work is the central subject of this section. But it should be clear at the outset that these are the stark alternatives: non-military measures that have proved to be ineffective, or military intervention.

The debate over the use of force, however, has been misleading. Military leadership has historically had difficulty in distinguishing between “deterrence” and

“defense” in Professor Snyder’s terms. As he defines the difference:

Essentially, deterrence means discouraging the enemy from taking military action by posing for him a prospect of cost and risk outweighing his prospective gain Deterrence works on the enemy’s *intentions* Defense reduces the enemy’s *capability*⁴

For Yugoslavia, this terminology has to be adjusted somewhat because if prospective intervention is to restore any of what the Serbs have already conquered, it must be offensive rather than defensive in military terms; similarly Thomas Schelling’s term, “compellence,”⁵ should be substituted for “deterrence.” The distinction between working on the enemy’s intentions and his capabilities remains the same, however.

The direct combat option for rolling back Serb gains appears impossible by any politically acceptable military means. According to Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell and others in the Pentagon, it would take 100,000 troops or more on the ground; but nobody wants American troops on the ground and President Clinton has forsworn that option in advance. Other members of NATO and the UN are even more dubious, and for good reason: Yugoslav terrain and ferocity held out against fifteen Nazi divisions for four years; neither the relief map nor the attitude has changed. The Vietnam analogy does not work for every aspect of potential military intervention in Yugoslavia, but the quagmire metaphor does apply.

Vietnam should also be cautionary for those who say “Well, let’s just take out the Bosnian Serb artillery by air.” Modern air power can certainly do fantastic things—over the last 20 years, technology has gone far beyond the sensors that allowed the United States to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail day and night—to little effect. Pinpoint targeting worked amazingly in the Arabian desert, and it is not up to a layman to assert that it might not work as well in the Bosnian mountains. Even if it did however, as one retired U.S. Army colonel pointed out in a TV interview, “a good mortar-man can fire five times and move before he is located.” Air can even the odds somewhat, but at its best it seems no more likely than in Vietnam to win a small-unit war against a determined enemy in difficult terrain. Nor can lifting the embargo and arming the Bosnians roll back the tide; there are just a lot fewer Bosnians than there are Serbs in the former Yugoslavia; and besides, this is a three-sided

⁴Snyder, emphasis in original.

⁵Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963, pp. 195ff.

conflict in which no two sides want the other to be victorious.

Rollback by direct military means thus seems quite out of reach by land or by air. "Leveling the field," however, might be feasible, using a combination of U.S./NATO air strikes and lifting the arms embargo on the Bosnian Muslims. Whether that would be worth the political and military costs, and whether it would help the Muslims enlarge their enclaves, which have already become miniscule, is a close question. What seems clearer is that it would not by itself gain any of the three major objectives: restoration, punishment, or an object lesson for the next aggressor.

If we are serious about the three goals, it will be necessary to change Serbian *intentions* by deterrence/compellence. General Michael Dugan, former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, argues for a combination of air power and aid to the Bosnians in which:

The United States should be willing to act unilaterally if necessary—not to impose a "peace," but to promote conditions whereby the belligerents are induced to resolve their own problems, *because the price for unacceptable behavior has become too high.*⁶

This is a substantially different military strategy from either "100,000 troops to grind them out" or "bomb out all their guns." The italicized phrase about raising the price provides the essence of deterrence—working on enemy intentions. Yet, as Dugan recognizes: "These are incremental steps; they smack of 'limited war,' and all the baggage that comes with that term; a recollection of the U.S. experience in Vietnam." That is true, but as he also points out, it is at least preferable to seeking "Decisive results, like 'unconditional surrender.'"

Our capability and willingness to "raise the price of unacceptable behavior" until the price itself becomes unacceptable to the enemy is the essence of deterrence/compellence. There is no doubt that we could have bent the Vietnamese enemy to our will by raising the price—if it did not suffice to "bomb him back to the stone age," with high explosives as General Curtis LeMay suggested, then we could have bombed him to before the stone age with nuclear weapons. We chose not to do so—thank God; the enemy chose to tolerate the worst we were willing to throw at him; he won.

To work in Yugoslavia, political will and military force would have to be ready—as they were not in Vietnam—to keep taking the next step if the last one did not achieve its objective. What this emphatically does not mean is what has happened so far—a six-month debate over whether to enforce a "no-fly" zone over

Bosnia, a similar argument over bombing Serbian airfields. When each next step becomes harder and harder for world decisionmakers to take, the Serbs seem smart and tough enough to wait. Rather, effective deterrence requires a decision, clear in advance to the enemy, to be willing to go, if not all the way to the top, several escalatory steps beyond the one being taken at any given time. *Without such a clear decision, deterrence/compellence will be no more than a futile gesture.*

For three reasons, such a decision, or decision-making mechanism, seems unlikely in Yugoslavia:

Multilateralism

No international organization—not the UN, not NATO—appears to possess the capability of making such a decision. If it were to be done, it would have to be done unilaterally by the United States—not like Desert Storm, with the clear joint interests of many nations at stake, but like the Libyan raid, on a much more serious scale. General Dugan straightforwardly favors acting "unilaterally if necessary," even for the first small steps he suggests; most advocates of military action fudge the point. Yet, effective unilateral action would unambiguously make the United States not the world's sheriff, with the implications that term carries of at least having to organize a posse, but the world's policeman. Whatever our interests in acting in Yugoslavia, it would run the risk of doing far more damage to our interest in the multilateral principle of collective security as well as our alliances.

Pressure Points

Even if we could straighten out the decisionmaking mechanism on our side, what about the other side? Detering a diffuse group like the Bosnian Serbs may be as impossible as deterring the South Vietnamese Viet Cong guerrillas. As in Vietnam, the object of deterrence would be the parent, in this case, Serbia itself; that has already been recognized in targeting the economic sanctions. But would any military action to deter or punish Serbia call off the brethren of Bosnia? Not certain.

Morality

Whatever our interests in achieving the objectives of defeating military aggression and punishing war crimes, they are largely moral interests, and the moral balance of using the required open-ended deterrence to reach these objectives would be in substantial question. The first step—attacking Bosnian Serb artillery—seems relatively clean; that is why after long debate it might actually

⁶Michael Dugan, "Air Power Can Succeed Without Deciding," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1993, p. B-7. Emphasis added.

happen. Even if the artillery pieces were surrounded by only mature soldiers, however, the Bosnian Serbs would be likely to put the next “military” targets close to civilians of all ages. Attacks on the airfields and other military targets in Serbia proper that might be next on the ladder would probably also hurt civilians, and civilians not directly involved in Bosnia at that. And the escalatory ladder would have to move eventually to what in the Cold War were euphemistically called “countervalue” targets, i.e., nonmilitary ones. Through all this, of course, the TV pictures would begin to feature Serb children in agony—at our hands—not just Bosnian Muslims. All this is horrible. True, we killed civilians in Vietnam, we killed many in World War II, and we threatened millions with Cold War deterrence, but the real question remains: *In Yugoslavia, where our national interests are small, and where there are no pure “good guys”—it is clear that all sides have committed atrocities, albeit in very unequal measure—are we willing to kill children to retaliate for the killing of children or to roll back “ethnic cleansing?”*

In fact, the answer to the last question is not clear. My personal choice is not to intervene, but the crimes to be punished are the worst in Europe since the holocaust of the 1940s, and a plausible argument can be made that only by punishing them and poisoning the fruits of a criminal victory can we deter the next try.

What seems much more certain in any case is that an agonized relatively ineffective first step or two, against artillery or bases isolated from civilian populations, will still kill people; will cost the United States, politically and otherwise; and will nonetheless leave Messrs. Milosovic and Karadzic unpunished, while failing to move the Bosnian Serbs back into “their” areas on Mr. Vance’s and Lord Owen’s map.

It seems equally certain that few in the United States, or in NATO or in the world, are willing to contemplate going beyond that futile gesture to the open-ended escalation that might work. The tough and cold-blooded decision to escalate attacks on Serbian civilians if necessary seems highly unlikely. In that case, the agonizing moral choice between two evils becomes the much easier one of not choosing to do it wrong.

The Next Time

At this point it appears most likely that not even the futile gesture will be made. There seems no possibility of reaching any of the three objectives of rollback, punishment, and providing a warning against the next time. The implications—in the Balkans, in Europe, and in the world—of such alternative failures need exploration, but that will not be done in this paper. Rather, the remainder of the exploration will be devoted

to possible U.S. policy for avoiding “the next time,” or coping better with it if it occurs.

The best course, of course, is to avoid a next time. By getting in early before the stakes get too high—and suggesting that they could get that high unless a potential aggressor backs down—at least some aggressions may be deterred. Hindsight suggests that this might have been possible in the Persian Gulf; had it been made quite clear to Saddam that his invasion of Kuwait would be taken as an attack on an American vital interest, in which we were willing to escalate in order to win, he might not have invaded. Making the stakes to ourselves clear in advance is the essence of the argument presented elsewhere, in favor of a systematic policy to deter first nuclear use.⁷

Some have contended that early and resolute action in Yugoslavia could have had the same effect. But, as has been noted, the world and the West never had enough common agreement, even on objectives let alone means, to act early. Indeed, the Yugoslav example demonstrates the difficulty of getting in early.

And if aggression does take place, the central question becomes: When and how should the United States use its deterrent power to end attacks that have already started, to substitute effective action for the futile gesture? It is becoming increasingly obvious that this is the appropriate way to put the question—what should *the United States* do? No other nation or collectivity is going to take the first action—it is up to us. Thus, one possible answer to the question is that we should indeed become the world’s policeman, the universal crime-fighting role toward which strong unilateral action in Yugoslavia would thrust us. We and we alone have the military power to deter or to defeat most aggressions; we are recognized, by much of the world and much more than during the Cold War, as being a “moral” nation; in many cases at least, we can get substantial concurrence, perhaps even official concurrence, through the UN.

Designing and pinning on the universal policeman’s badge involves so many ramifications—philosophical, moral, political, and pragmatic—that it would take a book not being written here. The last line of the book, however, would likely be that in the near or foreseeable future, only in the case of a very few “vital” American interests will we be ready to take the role of single policeman in what would thereby become a very new world. For most cases, the role will continue to be that of sheriff.

The real questions, then, will concern the specific conditions under which we should/could/might use our deterrent power to prevent or reverse an aggression,

⁷Levine.

and how we might use it. The basic issues are those listed in the last section: multilateralism, pressure points for successful deterrence, and morality. And the touchstone, as always, will and should be U.S. national interests. Under what conditions would those interests transcend the need for unachievable multilateralism that paralyzed action in Yugoslavia? Without attempting here to define or list such interests⁸—they might be more or less Wilsonian in their inclusion of moral considerations—they can be classified by the willingness of the United States to act on them, with or without the rest of the world:

- a. *Interests that are ours alone*, and on which we are prepared to act with little expectation of world or allied concurrence. Libya, Grenada, and Panama are examples, but small ones. It is possible to conceive of larger examples that might engage our vital interests, and for which we would be willing to escalate as necessary to preserve those interests. Making such willingness clear in advance could deter attacks on the interests. Such cases might well arise in the Western Hemisphere, and indeed, advance-notice-intended-to-deter is what the Monroe Doctrine is about.
- b. *Interests that we hold strongly in common with others*, from whom we have good reason to expect cooperation. NATO is the best example. The United States proclaimed its willingness to escalate as necessary to prevent Soviet attack on Western Europe, and the gesture was not futile—deterrence worked. Had the United States and joint interest in the Persian Gulf been made as clear in advance, Saddam might have been deterred.
- c. *Interests that we hold if and only if they are held in common with our allies*. It can be argued that Yugoslavia could have fit here. Whatever its importance to the United States, it was more important to Europe. If our European allies felt a threat to their own vital interests, and if the Europeans needed our support, then it would have been in our interest to supply that support. It did not work out that way; if they felt such an interest, they never found a common way to express it. From then on, any gesture was bound to be futile.
- d. *Interests that nobody holds strongly enough to act on*, at least not to act effectively by demonstrating a willingness to escalate as necessary. Yugoslavia does fit here.

⁸Robert A. Levine, *What If the Russians Aren't Coming and the Americans Aren't Staying*, RAND, N-3331-CC, 1991, did attempt such a definition and listing.

- e. *Interests that the world holds strongly, but for which the United States must act unilaterally, if action is to be taken*. No examples in this category exist, but they could, bringing us back full circle to the true world policeman role. It is listed here because it bears on deterrence of nuclear first use.

The categorization subsumes the multilateralism criterion discussed above. The other two criteria—pressure points for successful deterrence and morality of particular interventions—must depend on the specifics of each case.

Deterring future Yugoslavias is going to be made more difficult by the failure of either a futile gesture or no futile gesture in Yugoslavia. Indeed, perhaps such occasions cannot be deterred because the world including the United States does not have sufficient interest to deter them. It may well be that no country will be willing to act unless its borders or those of close allies, or its economic interests, are threatened. If so, most aggressions will fit into category d, and will succeed. But if, for example, crossing of long-existent European borders, even in the Balkans, were to threaten perceived West European interests sufficiently to make them get their act together—then they and the United States had best make clear soon that such borders are more sacred than those internal to Yugoslavia. This case would then fall into category b, with the United States and allies prepared to go beyond the futile gesture—if, in fact, they were.

For the United States, a long-run security policy based on the necessity of our remaining the world's posse-organizing sheriff without moving to the role of solitary policeman should begin by sounding out with our allies which cases belong in collective action categories b or c. It will be very important to make clear in advance that any case we intend to be under our security umbrella not be misunderstood by a potential aggressor to be uncovered. If Dean Acheson actually did suggest that South Korea was outside the U.S. security perimeter in the 1940s, that misunderstanding helped lead to the Korean War of 1951.

Advance decisions will always be provisional—no decisionmaker would or should consider even a lesser variety of “doomsday machine”⁹—but once a decision has been made to pursue an interest, we should be prepared to do what it takes. Such realistic readiness to go beyond the futile gesture will provide the best deterrence to the occasion arising in the first place.

⁹Herman Kahn's construct of a nuclear deterrent that would destroy the world if specified conditions were violated, and once set could not be turned off by a decisionmaker who had changed his mind. *On Thermonuclear War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1961, pp. 145ff.

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