

# **Beyond Bosnia: The Need for Realism in Using American Military Force**

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The debate over the US intervention in Bosnia is simply the latest version of a much broader debate over the use of US military force and over how US military forces should be shaped to deal with limited interventions, police actions, peace keeping, and peace enforcement.

On the one hand, there are advocates of using US forces to try to create a new world order and reshape the world. On the other hand, there are advocates who argue that US forces should only be used to service vital American interests and under the strictest strategic and tactical constraints.

Both of these positions are wrong. Both are based on myths and illusions that would either commit the US to a hopelessly unrealistic set of goals or paralyze its ability to act as a superpower. As a result, it is time to look beyond Bosnia, review the myths that now shape much of our thinking, and take a far more realistic view of the world we live in and what we can and cannot do.

### **The New World Order**

The first myth is that there is going to be a “new world order.” It is already clear that history is not ending. The end of the Cold War may have removed a central focus for US security, but it has scarcely remade the world. Most of the countries in the world have only been marginally affected by the end of the Cold War. In fact, many nations that have been affected by the end of the Cold War, have been affected largely by removal of super power concerns that had a limited stabilizing influence on their region or nation.

Virtually all of the countries of the Former Soviet Union face at least another decade of crisis and change and further conflicts within and among such states are a virtual certainty. A rush towards self-determination in other states following the break up of the Warsaw Pact has triggered many of the same results as a similar rush in the Versailles Treaty, and is also likely to lead to conflict.

A quick review of the current edition of the CIA Factbook shows that there are at least 100 nations in the world that face major ethnic, sectarian, demographic, and religious problems. About 30% of the nations in the world have at least one disputed boundary, and about 30% have serious ethnic or religious differences. In most nations, there are growing economic problems, problems with social change, population pressures, water, and other sources of conflict.

There is no pause in world arms race. The volume of arms sales may currently be down in some regions, but Asia is becoming the new “Middle East” in terms of growing arms buys, new transfers of more lethal technologies continue, and proliferation continues. Recent testimony by US intelligence offices indicates that at least 20 states are now involved in acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

### **Policing the World**

A second and related set of myths is that any one can “police” the world. Hans Morganthau warned after World War II about the American tendency to moralize international relations, and to transform crises and conflicts into eschatological struggles between good and evil. He talked about the “politics of realism.”

We need those “politics of realism” today. The US may have the air and naval power to project military force anywhere in the world, but there are many regions where such power projection would be almost totally ineffective in meeting a strategic goal or lack the strength to be decisive. There are even more areas where any form of American power projection could not address the causes of conflict or hope to resolve them.

Anyone with an outline map of the world and a crayon can color in much of the world as inherently unpolicable -- even by the “world’s only super power.” For example, the US must be just as cautious about the assumption that it can police a conflict in most of Asia as about the he assumption it can fight one.

We also need to be realistic about the number of conflicts that would have to be policed to go beyond limited and highly selective US and international action. Depending on one’s definition, there are 20-30 crises going on in the world. This is roughly the same number of crisis that have gone on every since World War II. It is almost certainly the same number of crises day that will go one through the rest of our lives

Neither we, the UN, nor anyone else can “police” more than a fraction of that number. Further, some very serious crises like the India-Pakistan conflict and the civil war in the Sudan are virtually beyond international intervention. As a result, both the US and the UN will be forced to deal with most crises through diplomatic action, good intentions, and “strategic indifference” -- just as the they have done been in the past.

### **The Limits to Military Action**

The third myth is that “policing” can be largely a military mission, and military intervention can hope to either shape a new world order or resolve most conflicts. We need to remember the faced by the travelers moving through Jurassic Park.

“Complexity” or “chaos” theory is not simply a warning about the value of security measures and fences in a park where dinosaurs get out of control. It is warning about the limits of military solutions in dealing most internal and international tensions and conflict. In most conflicts, there will be far too many variables for military action to resolve the conflict. In many cases, a crisis or conflict will only be resolvable through massive nation-building exercises that address political, cultural, and economic factors. In most cases, however, such problems will be too complex and too expensive to work.

We need to think back the lessons of our Cold War efforts at “policing.” Vietnam was not a military problem. Angola was not a military problem. Cuba was not a military problem. Similarly, there is a reason that most past UN

peacekeeping forces have either failed or have become locked into their mission for a decade or more. Military peacekeeping action could at best alleviate a conflict or freeze the situation in place. It could not resolve conflicts or create a "warm peace."

If we look at the lessons of Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia, we discover the same limits to military or broader forms of international action. The benefits of non-humanitarian action in Somalia were largely offset by the cost of failed attempts at nation-building. Endemic Haitian political and social problems seem increasingly likely to triumph over the benefits of US intervention. The best we can hope for in Bosnia is partition with peace and honor.

We cannot give up efforts at conflict resolution, but we need to understand just how resilient most nations and cultures really are, and just how difficult it is to change history. We may create the temporary illusion of order, but more powerful forces will destroy this order in time -- just like the fences in Jurassic Park.

Further, every time we broaden the definition of "policing" and peace keeping to include political and economic dimensions, and elements of nation building, we add "raptors" to the Jurassic Park in which a military mission must operate. When we add complexity to already difficult tasks, we create unpredictable open-ended missions, and we make missions progressively more contingency-specific, more expensive, and more difficult to control.

Further, these basic forces of human society are a grim warning about trying to rely on military technology as a panacea and the benefits of the revolution in military affairs or "force multipliers." In far too many cases, we will find that even when such tools allow us to "defeat" the military forces of an "enemy," they cannot solve the problem. In other cases, there will be no "enemy," the war will be of too low intensity for such tools to be effective, or the struggle will be too politically complex.

We need to remember in this era of high tech battle management and information warfare that it is far easier to create artificial stupidity than create artificial intelligence, and that it is impossible to deal with the political dimension of peace enforcement by creating artificial compassion.

Finally, we need more respect for history. Meddling in the present may sometimes make us feel good, or seem to suit today's TV images and moral imperatives. In some cases, however, the burst of and killing we try to halt might well resolve conflicts more effectively than international intervention. In other cases, intervention may institutionalize ineffective or unworkable political structures and borders, or force years of effort to preserve artificial settlements.

We must seek to contain violence and conflict must be contained as best we can within the means we have available. However, we must never forget that violence is a natural force of change and that some forms of violence end in being constructive and that others are beyond our control.

## Repeating the Past

The fourth myth is that peace keeping or peace making missions are a new feature of the post-Cold War era and fall into predictable patterns with predictable rules on a global basis and with measurable risks and strategic value. This myth can only lead to another attempt to meet impossible goals.

What do the conflicts in Sri Lanka, the civil war in the Sudan, the conflict between India and Pakistan, the war against the Kurds in Turkey, China and Taiwan really have in common?. What is the military mission? What is the broader mission and common strategic context of these conflict that allows us to tailor military forces to meet all these different needs? What are the common elements of non-military uses of military forces and what are the common elements of "nation building?"

The problem created by the "complexity" of different conflicts and crises becomes even greater when we review the range of conflicts since the end of World War II. Work by Herbert J. Tilemma traced over 600 armed interventions between 1945 and 1988.<sup>1</sup> Roughly 105 of these 600 conflicts involved a foreign state intervening in the affairs of another state and 269 involved significant armed conflict.

Virtually all of these conflicts involved different force mixes, politico-military conditions, different terrain, and cases where there was no clear "bad guy" or "enemy." More than two-thirds started suddenly and were not predicted months earlier by US planners. Many involved prolonged or repetitive struggles -- often lasting half a decade or more -- and which reoccurred in spite of one or more major efforts at conflict resolution.

We also need to understand that most of the human costs of these conflicts had nothing to do with the kind of high technology conflict which we are best equipped to fight, and which allow us to limit casualties and the time in which our forces must be engaged. While it is impossible to make any accurate estimates of those who died, Tilemma's list of civil conflicts indicates that direct combat and war related effects like famine and disease produced well in excess of 10 million dead. Virtually all of the direct military casualties in these conflicts were caused by relatively low technology weapons like rifles, automatic weapons, artillery, mortars, and mines.

We need to recognize our limits. We can do a better job of preparing for peace making and "police" operations. For example, we can budget for them to allow our military services to adapt to such needs without consuming the funds needs for readiness and modernization. We can try to improve our regional intelligence analysis, the breadth of our special operations capabilities, our ability to support non-military operations, and our numbers of foreign area specialists to deal with a wide range of Third World countries and regions. We can try to improve our linguistic resources. These are all important needs for the kind of missions we must perform, where we already know we have major shortfalls in capability, and where we often are now making devastating *cuts* in our military forces.

The fact remains, however, that our peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and “police” functions are almost certain to be driven by uncertainty and our response will have to be “capability driven”. We must accept the fact we will have to rely largely on our current method of using “shake and bake” mixes of US forces that are improvised according to need. We also must accept the fact we face growing resource constraints and the primary mission of defending the US and securing key regional interests overseas. We will have to continue to give priority to Europe, the Gulf, and Asia, and we can only improve our “police” forces and capability to perform non-military missions at the margin.

### **Vital and Non-Vital Strategic Interests**

The previous myths largely affect the idea that we can police the world. At the same time, we face equally unrealistic myths that argue for non-intervention. These myths include the myth that the US only needs to use military force in dealing *vital* strategic interests, the myth that it can always plan to avoid casualties, and the myth that limit its actions to predictable end games and choose to act only when it knows the outcome will be success.

Few phrases in the history of American strategic rhetoric have been as inherently dangerous as the idea a world power can restrict its actions to “vital” strategic interests. The US has many interests it must defend that are not vital, and no one cannot predict history well enough to know exactly what crisis or conflict will prove to be a “vital” interest in the future.

We declared Korea to be non-“vital” shortly before the Korean War, and we declared Vietnam to be “vital” when we walked into a pointless morass. We have made Bosnia a “vital” interest less than a year after our Secretary of Defense gave a speech explicitly stating it was not. Once again, complexity and chaos theory is a warning against the hubris inherent in any attempt to create a the binary division of conflicts and crises into “vital” and “non-vital” interests.

A global superpower can influence events, but it must still engage wherever reality drives it. This fact is illustrated by work done by Adam Spiegel of the Center for Naval Analysis. His work traces at least 240 uses of US military forces between 1945 and 1988. About 190 of these uses of force had little to do with the Cold War and virtually none had anything to do with “vital” interests. Most uses of force involved minor interventions, protection of US nationals, demonstrative actions, and limited uses of force. Many of these US interventions went virtually unnoticed by the US public and world opinion, but they were part of a pattern of limited “police” actions that have characterized US military operations ever since the end of World War II.

If we look at an earlier study that Barry Blechman and Steven Kaplan did for Brookings, we also find that most of these non-“vital” US uses of military force were successful. In fact, they were successful because we recognize that we could not reshape the world, but that we could often serve limited US interests with operations limited in scope to military tasks, had a narrow focus on direct US interests, and that could be performed cost-effectively with existing forces.

If we look in detail at the history of several hundred US military actions before the end of the Cold War, we find that we intervened where such force mixes seemed likely to be effective, and adopted a posture of “strategic indifference” where they did not. We also find that we were most effective when we could intervene early and when we could deal with a problem before it could be termed a “vital” national interest.

We find that most US uses of force had to be improvised with little warning, and that we had no way to precisely predict the ultimate outcome or to control the casualty level without rapidly withdrawing from the intervention. We see that we had to engage in a climate of uncertainty and without an insurance policy based on “20-20 foresight.” We accepted that uncertainty as a fact of history and as the price of being a world power.

We also find that most of our more serious interventions required us to change our forces on the spot. They involved the sudden assembly and adaptation of mixes of existing US combat-ready and forward deployed or rapidly deployable forces.

### **A Realistic Approach to US Intervention**

In looking beyond these myths, we need to firmly understand that the current debate over “policing the new world order” is not only a debate over mission impossible, it is a debate over mission absurd. We cannot manage chaos, we can only deal with it as best we can.

The real issue is when and how US forces should be used selectively in a wide range of interventions which involve anything from the most limited to the most vital US strategic interests, and we can include intervention in ongoing conflicts or peacemaking that involves a substantial risk of war or actual fighting.

This suggests that we must adopt very different criteria for shaping the use of US military forces from those of trying to be a strategic policeman, and that we must reject many fashionable strategic doctrines that a recipe for strategic paralysis.

US forces should not be used to support impossible hopes of new world order, try to stage morality plays with real bullets, or be used as a substitute for failed diplomacy or a lack of preventive diplomacy. Force and the threat of force can rarely rescue failed policies, or alter the basic structure of nations and causes of conflict.

We must also accept the fact that we will have to rely primarily on diplomatic action in most crises, that our primary global military posture in dealing with these crisis will be one of “strategic indifference.”

As a result, our most important choice will be when and where to act. There are too many conflicts and crises to come for the US, the US and any coalition of allies, or the UN to do anything else. Taking sides must be an extremely careful decision, and not one based on the tendency to moralize local conflicts, demonize perceived enemies and sanctify those who lose or suffer.

Cost and duration will be very real issues, as is the risk of becoming involved in peripheral issues at the cost of creating political barriers to necessary action or wasting military and financial resources. In most cases, we must accept the fact that "nation building" is too costly and too uncertain to be worthwhile.

We must also have no illusions about the value of international action and the UN. Coalitions will often be useful, but the US must seek highest possible freedom of US action. We must not become part of multilateral efforts that subsume US interests to regional or external controls unless there are clear and vital reasons to do so.

### **Accepting the True Nature of Force**

If we are to be successful, we must also reeducate ourselves about the true nature of force. The threat of force must always be backed by the willingness to actually use force. We must not be over-cautious about using force when force is needed, and we must be willing to use the level of force necessary to win quickly and decisively.

Equally important, we need to become less sensitive to casualties of any kind or doom ourselves to ineffectiveness. We now risk strategic paralysis every time anyone in the US military dies in combat or an accident, every time there is a case of fratricide or collateral damage, or even when we are too successful in killing the enemy.

We cannot remain a superpower and act on the assumption that force can be used without killing US military personnel, without killing civilians, without killing the enemy, and without taking the risk of escalation to higher levels of conflict. Death is often the price of power, and the sending US forces into "police" actions and other interventions in the hope that force does not mean killing is about as practical as sending a nun to halt an orgy.

We do need to try to find new ways to minimize deaths of any kind, and to make non-lethal force more cost-effective in more tactical applications. Meeting this challenge, however, still requires the courage to admit that some things are worth dying for, that some things are worth killing for, and that accepting some casualties is often the price of avoiding much larger casualties by allowing a conflict to continue, accepting defeat, or being forced to withdraw.

### **Realistic Criteria for Military Intervention**

We have learned a number of important criteria for military intervention over the last few years, but each must be kept in careful perspective. We must set criteria for intervention that are based on a realistic understanding of what we can and cannot hope to control.

We must act on the principle that the risk of conflict and casualties must be related to the importance of US interests. We must only act when there is a reasonable probability of success at a reasonable cost. *But*, we must never fall into the trap of insisting on a high probability of success with a low probability as our primary criteria for taking every type of military action.



We must try to set clear rules of engagement and enter into intervention with a clear picture of the “end game.” Where possible, we should determine this end game on the basis of a broad perspective. We must justify major uses of force on the basis of grand strategic goals and not on the basis of temporary reductions suffering or short term changes in the political situation. *But*, we must also understand that the rules change the moment we act, and we must be flexible in terms of goals, means, and “exit strategies.”

We must accept the need to use force in a wide range of contingencies. *But*, we must not use force to rescue failed diplomacy. Military personnel must be regarded as citizens and not as pawns. We must also never attempt to rely on force where other tools are necessary or where we cannot provide the proper level of other efforts. If political and economic action are critical to the success of military action, we must only use force if we have the economic and political means to act and the willingness to pay for such action..

We must try to limit interventions in scope and time and have specific and realistic goals for military action. *But*, we must accept the fact that events will often move beyond our control. “Crisis management” is always a goal we must strive for, but we must never forget that it will often prove an oxymoron.

At a more technical level, military command must be military in nature and capable of effective and decisive action. Once nations agree to the use of force, it cannot be placed under a committee-like structure such as the UN or supervised by its unwieldy bureaucracy. There must be a single person in charge of providing political leadership and a clear and unified chain of command. There must be proper local delegation, and the price for US military action in uses of force where the key forces are American must be that that these persons are American.

### **The Need for Leadership and the Role of the President, Congress, Media, and Public Opinion**

Finally, we must be more realistic about the need for Presidential leadership, and the role of Congress, the media, and public opinion. We do need to seek consensus, but we must also accept the need for leadership.

Wherever possible, the Administration must seek US domestic political support and a high probability of sustaining that support. Public and political opinion must be prepared to accept the risk of casualties if there is a substantial risk of casualties.

The US must not, however, be paralyzed by opinion polls or the Congress. The War Powers Act is not flawed in detail, it is rather based on a concept that is fundamentally incompatible with the US acting as a superpower.

Similarly, Presidents must maintain a close and constant liaison with Congress on every major crisis, consult early and in detail, honestly seek Congressional advice, and seeking Congressional approval of major uses of US forces. *But*, bipartisan and Congressional consensus cannot be a criteria for rapid and decisive Presidential action.

Presidents must be free and willing to lead, and only then be governed by Congressional action and the outcome of elections. Presidents must also be willing to maintain continuity of action, to ignore limited set backs or media crises, and adjust missions and forces to reality. They must reject the current emphasis on "strategic predestination."

This courage to lead must be supported by the courage to fund. Presidents and the Congress must also be willing to pay for US interventions, rather than try to force the US military to fund them at the expense of readiness and modernization. US military actions should be funded by timely budget supplementals, and not by delayed or inadequate requests made long after the money is taken out of the operations and maintenance budget of the Department of Defense. If US actions are worth staking, they should be supported out of the entire federal budget.

### **Living in A Violent World With Limited Resources**

In conclusion, we need to remember reality without paralyzing our ability to use our strengths. We are not going to rebuild the world in our lifetimes, we are not going to bring an end to history or endemic global violence. We are not going to see the triumph of good or evil or the unity of man. We are not going to be able to manage every crisis or create a new world order. Every reader of this article is almost certain to die in a world nearly as violent and uncertain as the world he or she lives in today.

At the same time, we still retain the strength to accomplish a great deal. We already live in a world where American power has, and is, accomplishing a great deal. We have many past successes to point to, and we have already learned much since the end of the Cold War.

The real challenge is to accept the nature of the world we live in, accept the limits on our capabilities and resources, and show more common sense. We do not need to change the basic character of our policies or military forces as much as to avoid tying them to myths and rhetoric and to unrealistic global ambitions or narrow recipes for national strategic paralysis.

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<sup>i</sup> Herbert K. Tillema, International Armed Conflict Since 1945, Boulder, Westview, 1991.