Peacekeeper "Neutrality"

A less obvious but no less important problem with peacekeeping in conditions of conflict is the emphasis it places on the neutrality of the peacekeepers. At first glance it is appealing to talk about bringing in a neutral force to stop the fighting, not to take sides. But the consequence is that the peacekeepers cannot take sides even between victims and aggressors. This presents a practical as well as moral difficulty: by precluding support of local forces the requirement of neutrality increases the requirement for outside intervention. In many cases the most effective option that does not put the US forces at risk is to support local forces - Afghanistan is the most dramatic but not the only example. Yet in Bosnia the US is contemplating committing thousands of peacekeepers because it is unable to help the Bosnians defend themselves, in part because doing so might endanger the peacekeeping forces that are already there.

Breaking out of this circle requires choosing sides, choosing between victims and aggressors.

The fact that these issues are almost always ambiguous should not obscure the fact that choice is sometimes necessary, nor should the fact that choosing sides inevitably means reducing the number of countries cooperating with the US and perhaps means encountering opposition. The US cannot have it both ways; it cannot achieve substantial foreign policy aims, military or otherwise, if those aims must be limited to the shared interests of the most general of all international assemblies.

4 Feb 94

Bosnia's Serbs announced a full military mobilization, calling up all able-bodied men, summoning women to work in factories and putting the economy on a war footing. Both the Serbs and Croats have begun rounding up refugees and forcing them into military service (a violation of international law).

The US, Britain and France claimed that the UN forces in Bosnia had the right to use air power without consulting the Security Council and so risking a Russian veto.

10 civilians were killed when a Sarajevo market was shelled by the Serbs.

Clinton completed work on his guidelines for international peacekeeping: The US would take part in such actions if international security were threatened or a "gross violation of human rights" had occurred; other countries would have to be willing to take part, and US troops would usually have to be kept under American command.

No country has covered itself in glory over Bosnia. But America's policy is a source of growing frustration for its allies.

The gulf between the US and the Europeans with ground forces in Bosnia has been dangerously wide since the disastrous visit last year by the US Secretary of State, who supposedly came to Europe to sell it the idea of lifting the arms embargo and approving air strikes against the Serbs. The French and British, though nervous about the safety of their soldiers, might have gone along with the idea if pushed hard. But the US seemed more interested in discussing options than hard selling. Some Europeans concluded the mission was meant to self-destruct (i.e., it was meant to be seen domestically as taking action, but without committing the US to anything that might cost an election).

Safe-Haven Maneuver

The major global problem in 1992-1993 of common concern to Russia and the US was the Bosnian crisis. Russia's principal diplomatic initiative was in May 1993, at a time when military action seemed imminent to enforce Serbian agreement to a ceasefire and acceptance of the Vance-Owen peace initiative. Russia intervened to propose that the Bosnian Muslims be safeguarded in unprotected "safe havens". Russia won Clinton's and Secretary of State Christopher's support for the idea. The joint safe-havens proposal, developed by both countries, was duly deployed before the end of May.

It is hard to determine what US interests were served by the safe-havens proposal, a policy whose fate soon outran the most pessimistic predictions made for it. At the time the initiative also underlined what little coherence remained in America's Bosnian policy. This initiative was a success, however, from the Russian perspective. It dissipated the ripening threat of anti-Serb military action.

5 Feb 94

A single 120mm mortar shell crashed into a Sarajevo market, killing 68 civilians and wounding 200 others. It was the deadliest attack in the capital's 22-month siege.

"We are condemned to death, denied the right to defend ourselves," Bosnian Muslim leader Izetbegovic said, referring to the international arms
embargo. "Those who deprive US of the right of self-defense will be accomplices in this crime."

Bosnian Serb leader Karadzic suggested that the Muslims had fired on their own people as a way of persuading NATO to go ahead with threatened air strikes on Serb positions. (While this is unlikely, it not is not inconceivable. Just in the last few months we have seen in our own country - with the revelation of nuclear testing on unwitting civilians and soldiers - how a government can sacrifice its own innocents when fearful of defeat).

Clinton ruled out immediate military action, saying that the US first had to consult with "reluctant" allies and "give the UN a chance to confirm responsibility" for the attack.

7 Feb 94

The UN secretary general asked NATO to give him the power to order NATO air strikes against the artillery surrounding Sarajevo. (If the UN/NATO follows through on its threats, and does so with resolve, the Serbs may have just rescued defeat from the jaws of victory).

Boutros-Ghali's move signals a more assertive attitude on the part of France, which is the UN's principal troop contributor. However, other key allies remain reluctant. Britain and Canada - two other key troop contributors - continue to oppose air strikes, arguing that they would increase the risk to their peacekeepers and derail relief deliveries and negotiations to end the conflict. (As has happened in Somalia).

The British foreign secretary warned that a retaliatory strike may yield "simply one day of satisfaction... followed not by the lifting of the siege but its intensification."

The current US position, under review as a result of the market attack, is somewhere between pressing for air strikes and soliciting opinions. Said one top European official, America's credibility on Bosnia is "extremely low these days."

The use of force cannot be approached in an experimental way, by dispatching military personnel to withdraw them if they meet opposition. An even worse tactic would be to use bombing to send a signal to the Serbs to see how they respond. Nor can leadership be exercised simply by asking other countries for their views... (Coalition building) rests on the commitment that the US will get the job done and that countries that sign up with the US will not find themselves caught holding the bag. Without that kind of demonstrated will - and the capability to back it up - America's prospective partners will not tell it what they want because they will fear a course of action that brings risks but no results.

Military and political credibility are far too important to be dissipated, as they have been, in marginal commitments. Credibility helps deter future provocations that might otherwise result in war.

8 Feb 94

Clinton endorsed, but didn't actually okay, the UN chief's request for authority to order air strikes.

One idea, originated last summer, is being reconsidered: turning the Bosnian Serb capital of Pale into what one NATO planner called a "grave pit."

A more far-fetched idea being floated by the US is to send a special envoy to the Muslims to help them redraw the peace map to meet their security and political concerns. As part of that process, one official said, the Muslims might have to give up some of their battlefield gains of recent weeks. (Will these people never learn? What could ever possibly motivate the Muslims sacrifice what little victory they've achieved for the dubious prospect of a UN-secured peace?)

9 Feb 94

NATO is considering a US-French proposal that gives the Serbs a deadline for withdrawing their artillery around Sarajevo, or face air strikes. (Though the proposal would also apply to all warring parties, it chances of enforcement against the Muslims are even less than against the Serbs).

By hitting artillery batteries, aircraft could deliver the Serbs a salutary punch on the nose just as effectively as ground troops could. But they cannot hold territory. And if the Serbs decide to stand their ground and make a fight of it (A distinct possibility as command-and-control in the region are tenuous), it
would take a large number of sorties to keep the guns on the ground suppressed.

The risk then is that the war would escalate. What is more, after the air strikes have come and gone, the initiative would still rest with the Serbs. They have plenty of ways of retaliating against food convoys, vulnerable Muslim areas in other parts of Bosnia, UN barracks or off-duty soldiers. Air power can do a lot, but cannot alone lift the siege of Sarajevo, let alone win the war.

10 Feb 94

The US recognized the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia after two years of side-stepping in deference to Greece.

NATO gave the Serbs 10 days to withdraw their heavy weapons 12 miles from the center of Sarajevo, or place those weapons under UN control, or face air strikes. Even before the ultimatum was issued, the Serbs had agreed to a ceasefire in Sarajevo and told the UN that they would withdraw their weapons.

The chain-of-command argument seems to have been settled. Despite the objections of Russia (which wants Sarajevo immediately placed under UN administration, rather than be subjected to air strikes), Boutros-Ghali, the US and the Europeans reckon no further recourse to the UN Security Council is needed (where a likely Russian veto would scuttle the UN/NATO action).

US Airpower Mystique

American air power has a mystique that it is in the American interest to retain. When presidents use it, they should either hurl it with devastating lethality or extensively enough to cause sharp and lasting pain to a military and a society. Both uses of force cause problems. The first type represents, in effect, the use of air power for assassination; it sets troubling precedents and invites primitive but nonetheless effective forms of revenge. The second involves the use of air power in ways bound to offend many, no matter what pains the commanders take to avoid the direct loss of human life. To strike hard, if indirectly, at societies by smashing communication or power networks will invite the king of wrenching television attention that modern journalists excel at providing.

Still, to use airpower in penny packets is to disregard the importance of a menacing and even mysterious military reputation. "The reputation of power is power," Hobbes wrote, and that applies to military power as well as other kinds. The sprinkling of air strikes over an enemy will harden him without hurting him and deprive the US of an intangible strategic asset.

11 Feb 94

Mate Boban, the Bosnian Croat leader, resigned due to recent military defeats by the Muslims.

35 prominent ethnic Albanians were arrested after a demonstration in Kosovo.

13 Feb 94

1000 Malaysian troops reinforced the 1500 UN peacekeepers currently in Sarajevo.

* Note: Malaysia is a Muslim country. This is the first case of the UN using Muslim troops in Bosnia.

14 Feb 94

Dependents of US diplomats were pulled out of Belgrade as a precaution against possible Serb reprisals in the event of air strikes.

Pakistan was among seven Muslim countries that yesterday offered troops for UN operations in Bosnia. Pakistan offered 3,000 - which the UN accepted - however, the U.N. has no money for transport to Bosnia or equipment for the troops. Iran also offered troops, but was rejected.

Sarajevo was quiet as both Serb and Muslim forces handed over some heavy weapons to the UN.

Even if many Serb guns around Sarajevo are silenced for awhile, other Muslim enclaves, especially in eastern Bosnia, are all too vulnerable to retaliation. Nor would air strikes necessarily end Sarajevo's plight: water and power supplies are still under Serb control.

Air strikes intended to relieve Sarajevo might well have another dangerous consequence: by encouraging hardliners in the Muslim-led government and the Muslim militias to keep on fighting.

15 Feb 94

After the Serbs handed in only two more weapons, the UN's Bosnia commander repeated the threat of NATO air strikes.

* Note: There is an outstanding agreement signed by the British Foreign Office and the Bosnian Serbs promising to place Serb weapons around Sarajevo under UN control on the condition the
Bosnians did the same. It is dated August 27th, 1992.

Serb trustworthiness is not the only problem. The Serb capital of Pale is only a few kilometers from the center of Sarajevo. If Serb gunners do pull back 20 kilometers, who would protect the suddenly unprotected Serb villages from Muslim troops?

Another question is whether the outside world is now really ready to send the troops that are needed to police a demilitarized Sarajevo. That, more than a few air strikes, would truly test the UN and NATO's resolve.

16 Feb 94

The commander of the Serb forces besieging Sarajevo refused to withdraw his artillery. The U.S. repeated the threat to bomb any pieces that remained in the area after midnight 20 Feb.

17 Feb 94

Bosnian Serb leader Karadzic promised to comply with the NATO deadline for artillery withdrawal after Russian envoy Churkin said Russian troops would participate in the peacekeeping effort.

18 Feb 94

UN monitors reported large convoys of Serb artillery withdrawing from Sarajevo.

21 Feb 94

The Serbs completed a significant percentage of their heavy weapons withdrawal by yesterday's deadline despite heavy snow. NATO did not stand down, however, instead increasing its air cover in the hours leading up to the deadline. The siege, however, has not ended and the Serbs still control Sarajevo's power and water supply.

Cheering Serbs greeted 400 Russian peacekeepers as they arrived in Pale. Russia's efforts to get the Serb's guns out of NATO's bombsights had the happy effect of hastening compliance with NATO's ultimatum. But there is no disguising that it was done to thwart NATO military action, not to back it up. Addressing concerns that the Russians would look the other way at Serb transgressions, Warren Christopher, the US Secretary of State, warned that Russian peacekeepers in Bosnia ought to act professionally or "they won't be doing their job very long."

Chances are now much improved that the Serbs will be able to hold most of what they've won, which is 70% of Bosnia. Before the strong Russian diplomatic intervention Serbia and the Russian Serbs had good reasons to fear reprisals. Milosevic face a Serb population growing increasingly malevolent as hyperinflation and shortages brought on by UN sanctions grip the country. Karadzic was confronting a Bosnian Muslim army that is growing in strength, as well as morale problems in his own ranks.

22 Feb 94

If the Serbs turn some of the estimated 250 weapons they retrieved from Sarajevo last week against other besieged towns, the demands for Western retaliation will be hard to resist. The air strike strategy could also be used to force open the Tuzla airport or to relive Canadian peacekeepers in Srebrenica. The UN plans to reopen Tuzla by March 7th. The airport is essential to bringing relief to the thousands of starving civilians in central Bosnia.

23 Feb 94

Five Swedish peacekeepers were injured by shelling in Tuzla.

24 Feb 94

The Muslims and Croats signed a truce at a conference in Zagreb. The truce takes effect tomorrow. If it is to succeed, there will have to be an end to the Croat siege of Mostar, where 60,000 Muslims are trapped.

25 Feb 94

Muslim-Croat fighting continued up to the truce deadline. Despite that, the US is promoting a two-way division of Bosnia, with the Serbs getting one part, and the Muslim/Croats the other part.

26 Feb 94

The European Commission branded Greece's partial trade embargo on Macedonia illegal and said it would seek a ruling from the European Court of Justice.

28 Feb 94

The Muslim-Croat truce in Bosnia appeared shaky, prompting the UN commander to request more peacekeeping troops. Meanwhile, Muslim-Croat peace talks began in Washington, D.C.

1 Mar 94

US fighter jets shot down four Serb Galeb attack jets after six of the planes violated the "no-fly zone" over Bosnia. The Galeb were trying to bomb a Muslim munitions depot. The USS Saratoga, which had been on port call in Italy, put back to sea. It was the first time Serb jets had flown in a year. One explanation is that the Serbs were testing the limits of NATO's resolve, another is that they were trying to drive a wedge between NATO and Russia.

2 Mar 94

The Serbs agreed to allow relief flights into Tuzla. Meanwhile, they increased their attacks against Maglaj and other parts of Bosnia.

3 Mar 94

Bosnian Muslims and Croats agreed to form a "binational" state. The agreement is meant not only to end some of the fighting in Bosnia, but also to provide the basis for an economically viable Bosnian state. Further strengthening its chances for survival, the new state would be linked economically and militarily with Croatia, which also joined in yesterday's signing. It is doubtful if either the Croats or muslims would stick to the agreement if the Serbs refuse to concede any more territory.

Sources