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The War in Kosovo

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What are the conditions and factors which determine when and where states intervene in the conflicts between other nations? Understanding the processes which led to US intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo can provide at least partial answers to this question.

The pattern of US involvement in Bosnia tends to support the view that successful intervention in foreign conflicts requires the perception that national interests are at stake. The concept of national interest, however, must be expanded to include the political interests of important national leaders. In the case of Bosnia, intervention was motivated in large part by the desire of President Clinton to remove Bosnia from the national agenda before the 1996 election.

US intervention in Bosnia helped moved the conflict on the ground to a condition of stalemate. The US intentionally promoted this military stalemate, particularly by providing assistance to the Croatian army prior to its successful military offensive in Krajina. This strategy was based on an essentially amoral political calculation by American leaders. It was accepted and even welcomed by some US officials because it solved many of the thorny issues raised by the intermingling of populations on the ground. Successful intervention was ultimately made possible, however, by America's shift from one sided support for Bosnian Muslims and Croats to a recognition of the real interests and needs of the Serbs. This approach was revealed in the de facto recognition of the Bosnian Serb Republic during the Dayton talks. From this perspective it can be seen that US airstrikes in Bosnia served not only to pressure the Serbs, but also to pressure the Muslims. Following the strikes, the US was in a far better position to compel the Muslims to accept a deal with the Serbs.

The Dayton agreement formed the basis of peace in Bosnia but it also marked the beginning of US involvement in Kosovo. In the aftermath of the Dayton accords, both the Serbs and the Kosovar Albanians had significant incentives to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Kosovo. The Serbs wished to resolve the conflict peacefully because the Dayton accords suggested that progress in Kosovo was a major condition for the lifting of Western economic sanctions against Serbia. The Kosovar Albanian leadership under the non-violent LDK, on the other hand, hoped that a peaceful resolution to the conflict would help avert a threat to their leadership in Albania from the Kosovo Liberation Army.

The West, however, failed to follow up on the initial willingness of both sides to negotiate. There was no overt effort by the West to support the early negotiations between Serbs and Kosovars. At this time, the US was primarily concerned with progress in Bosnia and few US officials felt that any central US interests were at stake in Kosovo. As a result, Milosevic faced few incentives to continue negotiation and was able to delay making significant concessions. Nor did the West use this opportunity to support civil society in Serbia or to assist opposition political parties there.

The breakdown of negotiations between Serbs and Kosovars led to a decline in support for the moderate LDK and an increase in support for the violent methods and more radical agenda of the KLA. Increasingly violent KLA methods led Milosevic to fear that a major internal insurrection was underway in Kosovo. There is some indication that the US may have suggested to the Serbs that the US would not oppose the use of force to suppress the rebellion as long as Serbian operations remained at a proportionate level and did not involve genocidal violence against civilians.

As in Bosnia, only when the conflict grew worse did the US find its interests in Kosovo. US policy in Kosovo quickly passed from a policy of encouraging a settlement to which both sides would agree, to forcing a settlement on both sides. This proposed settlement was ultimately designed to satisfy US interests, not the interests of either the Serbs and Kosovars. Some US leaders may also have felt that intervention in Kosovo provided the opportunity to finally pay Milosevic back for his actions in Bosnia. The NATO bombing campaign was the final failure of a misconceived strategy designed to end the conflict in Kosovo through coercion. The campaign was premised on the false assumption that Milosevic was simply looking for an excuse to give up on Kosovo. Although the bombing may have been a success in the narrow sense of bringing an end to fighting, it did not form the basis for a successful resolution of the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo.

Rapporteur: Ben Valentino