

Kosovo: misreading the lessons for Iraq – and now Iran

Written by Brian Barder

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Kosovo: misreading the lessons for Iraq – and now Iran

<https://www.e-ir.info/2008/06/30/kosovo-misreading-the-lessons-for-iraq-%e2%80%93-and-now-iran/>

BRIAN BARDER, JUN 30 2008

According to a widely-accepted myth, NATO's military intervention over Kosovo, bear-led by the US and UK, was a grand success.[1] This misperception helped to encourage the blundering attack on Iraq four years later, and may yet lead to further blunders over Iran. So it's important to learn the true lessons of the Kosovo events if mistakes made then are not to be repeated yet again.

In 1999, Kosovo was a province of Serbia. The Kosovo Liberation Army, Kosovo Albanian guerrillas fighting for Kosovo independence, were mounting escalating attacks on the Serbian army and police. The Serbs, understandably regarding the KLA as terrorists, retaliated with unforgivable brutality. Following the failure of western intervention in Bosnia in the early 1990s to curb Serbian ethnic cleansing there, pressure grew in western capitals for intervention in Kosovo, this time with fewer inhibitions.

In February 1999 the Contact Group (five western countries plus Russia) invited the Serbs and the Kosovo Albanians to the French château of Rambouillet, purportedly in search of an agreement to end the conflict in Kosovo. It soon emerged that the real purpose, especially for the US delegation, led by the Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, was to create a pretext for a NATO military attack on Yugoslavia as a means of forcing the Milosevic government to hand over Kosovo to an international administration and NATO military garrison. Led by the US and UK, the NATO delegations, notwithstanding increasing Russian unease and eventual dissent, devised an ultimatum to be presented to the KLA and the Serbs under which NATO would occupy Kosovo and the Serbian forces would withdraw, pending an act of self-determination by the Kosovo people (effectively short-hand for independence). The ultimatum contained several provisions which, as well-placed observers subsequently admitted, could never have been accepted by any Serbian government. The Serbs duly rejected it. By virtually promising them eventual independence, Ms Albright secured Kosovo Albanian acceptance of the ultimatum. NATO thereupon began an aerial attack on targets throughout Yugoslavia, including Belgrade, inflicting extensive physical damage and numerous civilian casualties. The main objective proclaimed for the bombing was to force the Serbs also to accept the ultimatum.

Before the bombing began, many Kosovo Albanians had been driven from their homes by Serbian brutalities in retaliation for KLA attacks, but there had been no significant flight of refugees into neighbouring countries and most of the Kosovo Albanians had been able eventually to return to their homes and villages. With the start of the NATO attacks, however, Serbia's ethnic cleansing escalated and a refugee exodus began, causing serious problems in neighbouring countries. With no sign of Serbian submission to NATO's demands despite constant escalation of the bombing and steady proliferation of targets, some NATO countries began to question the justification for continuing the assault. The British prime minister, Tony Blair, led vocal demands for a ground invasion of Kosovo to drive out the Serbs, which would have been an enormously difficult and costly operation even if there had been the necessary unanimous NATO support for it, which there wasn't, and even if the US Congress had been willing to authorise indispensable US leadership of an invasion, which it wasn't.

A second and very different negotiation now took place. Faced with stalemate and growing divisions within NATO, and following G8 agreement on possible revised principles for a settlement, President Clinton quietly abandoned the attempt to exclude Russia from any settlement and invited President Yeltsin to nominate a representative to join a US negotiator, Strobe Talbott, the US Deputy Secretary of State, in a discreet search for a negotiated solution. Talbott

Kosovo: misreading the lessons for Iraq – and now Iran

Written by Brian Barder

was joined by Yeltsin's nominee, Viktor Chernomyrdin, former prime minister of Russia, and a veteran international fixer, the then Finnish President, Martti Ahtisaari. Together they drew up a revised settlement plan which omitted effectively all the provisions of the Rambouillet ultimatum that had prevented Serbian acceptance, and presented it to Milosevic. Recognising that the new demands were backed by Moscow as well as Washington, and seeing that their rejection of the revised plan would leave Serbia isolated and friendless, the Serbs saw that the game was up. NATO was at last able to end the 11-week bombing campaign, discreetly forgetting about the now discarded features of the original ultimatum which it had hitherto insisted were non-negotiable. The Talbott-Chernomyrdin-Ahtisaari plan, having received the formal approval of the UN Security Council (with Russian as well as US sponsorship), was put into effect. Ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, at any rate by Serbs of Kosovo Albanians, ended along with the bombing.

Consider the differences between the first of the two negotiations, at Rambouillet, and the second. The Rambouillet process achieved none of its proclaimed objectives: it failed to persuade or compel the Serbs to accept the ultimatum; it failed to end the ethnic cleansing – indeed, the bombing actually aggravated and accelerated it; the NATO attack on Yugoslavia which it inaugurated was unquestionably illegal, since it was not conducted in self-defence, nor authorised by the Security Council, thus damaging international respect for the core provisions of the UN Charter; it was essentially fraudulent, pretending to be an even-handed attempt to bring the parties to the conflict to a peaceful agreement, while actually designed as a pretext for the use of force against the Serbs to punish them for their misdeeds in Bosnia as well as Kosovo; it failed to dislodge Milosevic from the leadership of the Serbs (who themselves forced him out of office more than a year later); it involved NATO in an intensely destructive military action which was not only in breach of international law and a political failure, but also in clear breach of NATO's own North Atlantic Treaty; and it divided NATO's own membership. It failed to exclude Russia from the eventual settlement and by trying to exclude Russia, it deprived itself of any possibility of UN approval and legitimacy.

The second negotiation, discreetly launched by Clinton and the G8 and largely conducted in secrecy, avoided all these pitfalls. Russian participation not only forced the Serbs to accept the revised plan: it also ensured UN approval and legitimacy for the settlement. Its proclaimed and real objectives were the same. It took account of Serbia's legitimate concerns as well as those of the Kosovo Albanians. It enabled NATO to end the bombing without much loss of face – indeed, ending the bombing was a necessary condition of the agreement, even though Mr Blair and other interventionists have subsequently claimed as a success for the bombing the very settlement which the bombing failed to produce.

This ingenious reinterpretation of the lessons of Kosovo contributed to the disastrous US-UK attack on Iraq only four years later. Having convinced themselves that the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia had been a success and that it vindicated the new, flawed and self-serving doctrine of humanitarian intervention (proclaimed by Tony Blair in Chicago at the height of the bombing), President George W Bush and Mr Blair proceeded to repeat all the blunders that had led to the failure of the Rambouillet ultimatum and the NATO bombing: the failure to obtain UN authority for the attack; the doomed attempt to exclude and ignore Russia (as well as most of the rest of the world); the deliberate misrepresentation of the real motives for the attack (régime change and securing western oil supplies, not mainly ridding Iraq of WMD); the pretence of negotiation in the Security Council and even with Saddam Hussein, when the decision to attack Iraq had already been taken; the misrepresentation of the reliability of the evidence for Iraq's possession of WMD, paralleled by the misrepresentation in 1999 of the extent of the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo before the NATO bombing; the failure to plan beyond the military action phase. But this time there was no Bill Clinton available to see the light and quietly execute an overdue retreat from folly.

The parallel lessons of Kosovo and Iraq are far from academic. The same blunders are liable to be made in tackling Iran's evident determination to develop a nuclear weapon capacity as those committed in 1999 and 2003, especially the attempt to exclude Russia and to ignore the absolute requirement of broad international support for the use of force, as represented by the only body that can confer legality, the Security Council. Kosovo and Iraq illustrate the need for absolute clarity about real objectives; detailed planning for the situation after force has been used, if it has; above all, force used **only** as a genuinely last resort, when all efforts of flexible and honest diplomacy have failed. The eventual settlement in Kosovo could have been negotiated and agreed at Rambouillet without a bomb needing to be dropped or a rocket launched. Diplomacy saves lives as well as money and trouble.

Kosovo: misreading the lessons for Iraq – and now Iran

Written by Brian Barder

[1] Links to many of the sources for this article can be found at <http://www.barder.com/politics/international/kosovo/index.php>

Sir Brian Barder is a former British ambassador (Ethiopia, Poland) and high commissioner (Nigeria, Australia). Since retirement he has been a member of the Special Immigration Appeals Commission and sundry committees and boards. Honorary Visiting Fellow of the Centre for Diplomatic and International Studies, Leicester University. He campaigns on his blog for civil rights and other leftish causes <http://www.barder.com/ephems/>

About the author:

Former British diplomat, now retired. Blogs, listens to (real) music, cycles slowly in London streets.